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WHISPER WHO DARES

TERENCE STRONG

THE FIFTH HOSTAGE

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THE FIFTH HOSTAGE

It is 1980 and Iran is in turmoil. Fear grips the corridors of Whitehall: a Briton is being held in Teheran and the secret information he holds has catastrophic implications. The nation's most wanted man – and his devastatingly beautiful girlfriend – must be rescued, at all costs.

There is only one way to bring them home. Enter the SAS – 22 Special Air Service Regiment – a secret and elite fighting group, highly trained, determined, respected throughout the world.

A crack team is assembled and the mission is under way. It is a nail-biting race against time: the stakes are high and the dangers incalculable. It is not just the fittest who will survive.

Once again, Terence Strong has written a breathtaking thriller that takes you deep into the heart of Iran, the world of the SAS, and the private and service lives of these dedicated professionals. THE FIFTH HOSTAGE is a stunning and worthy successor to his previous bestseller, WHISPER WHO DARES.

Also by the same author,
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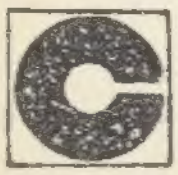
Whisper Who Dares

The Fifth Hostage

Terence Strong



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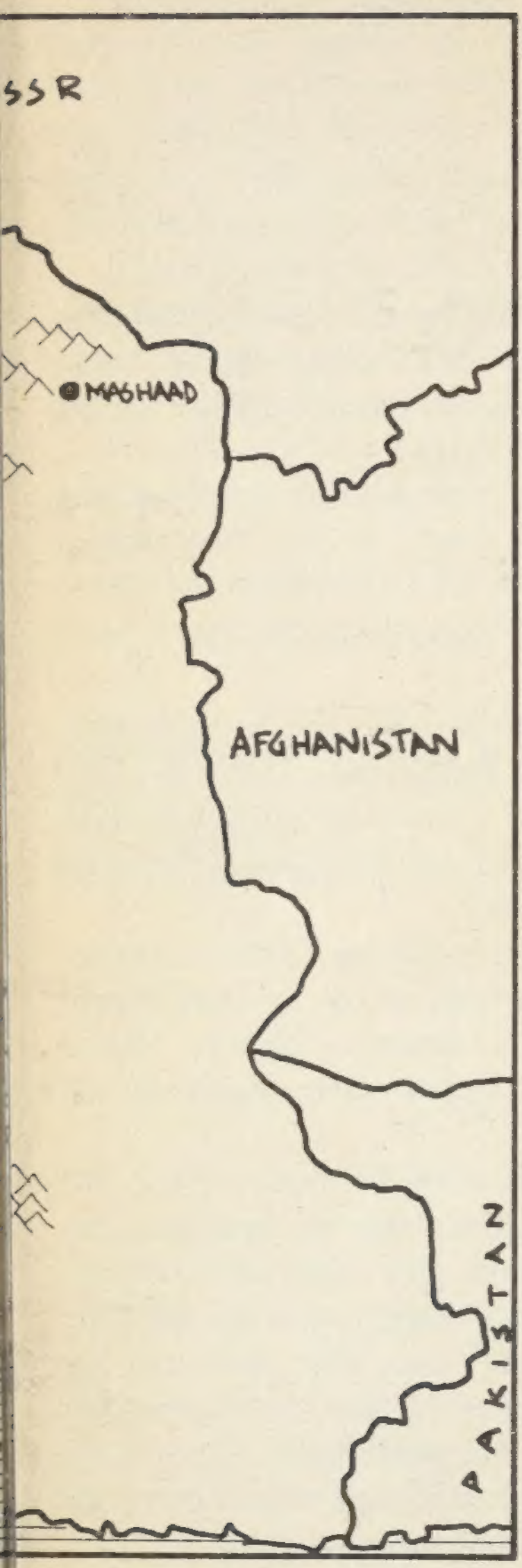

OPERATION: Snapdragon 1980

① Drop zone for Snapdragon

② Lordakam airstrip (disused)

③ Plan B pick-up point

---- Route taken

AUTHOR'S NOTE

After the brave but unsuccessful bid by the United States to rescue the 52 hostages from its Teheran embassy in 1980, many asked how Britain might have coped with a similar situation.

Certainly the British would not have had to cope with the unmanageable scale of operation faced by the Americans. But the basic logistics nightmare would have been the same. So what known and unexpected hazards might have been experienced by such a mission?

Undoubtedly it would have called for the multifarious talents of 22 Special Air Service Regiment. This elite and secretive British Army outfit had sprung to unaccustomed world attention earlier that year with the spectacular busting of the Princes Gate siege in London.

That, however, was a rare public display. This unorthodox regiment earned its first spurs back in the Second World War and subsequently in Malaya, Borneo, Oman, Ulster and the Falklands War – amongst many other, lesser known campaigns and assignments.

Mixing fact with fiction is fascinating for both writer and reader, particularly when it is realised that certain fact can *only* be more truthfully told as fiction. But there are dangers.

I feel it only right to make it clear that, to my knowledge, nothing like "Operation Fulcrum" was ever mounted by British intelligence services. However, the many possible reasons given as being behind it, are authentic. There is no doubt that these might have been considered valid by several interested nations and multi-national industrialists.

Indeed many think it strange that – in little over a year – a single religious agitator in exile could have risen from

obscurity to absolute control of one of the most powerful countries in the Middle East.

Unfortunately the horrors and methods of that revolutionary Islamic regime are not imagined. Nothing has been invented. At the time of writing Khomeini still lives. Ayatollah Beheshti was blown apart by a terrorist bomb not long after the events described in this book. Thankfully, Judge Khalkali enjoys a little less influence nowadays.

The mission described in this book, too, is accurate. It was planned as an SAS operation from start to finish. The routes used, roads, pylons, telephone lines and gas pipelines described are where stated.

It *could* all have happened exactly as written.

But did it?

Terence Strong
London 1982

My thanks for unstinting assistance on some technical details go to: aviation writer Peter Gilchrist; the Royal Observatory; Jo Dennis of E. Leitz (Instruments) Ltd, and Terry Burnal of CSE Aviation Ltd who taught me how not to fly his beloved Jet Rangers.

For my parents.
And for the thousands
of now silent innocents
in a mystical land
that deserved better.

But specially
the lads of 22.

PROLOGUE

THE HAWK HUNCHED on the high outcrop, eyes hooded against the fierce Omani sun.

Waiting.

Watching. Ever patient.

The penetrating eyes blinked as they relentlessly searched the wadi far below. This year the rain-laden winds of the *Khareef* had waned early and already the river bed was reduced to a mere stream. Given time the prey would come, picking its way carefully through the patches of frizzled grass and stunted thorn bushes at the water's edge. Given time.

As the sun reached its zenith the heat took on a throbbing momentum of its own. The very air itself began to bake.

In the shadow of the outcrop a man moved. Leaving the radio, he quickly scaled the few feet to the peak. He was small, wiry and unkempt, despite the fact that he wore military fatigues. A greasy sweatband kept his wild hair in place.

"Boss?"

Major Alan Hawksby's eyes didn't leave the wadi. "Yes, Scottie?"

"Contact. A mile te the west, approachin' doon a finger-wadi."

Hawksby almost smiled. Unlike the Scotsman, the major looked very much an Arab. Firm distinctive bone structure. Prominent hooked nose. Luxuriant black beard. And the green *shamag* head-dress turned up to form a turban.

Only the hard blue eyes might make one question his origins. Yet when he spoke Arabic, all such doubts would evaporate. He was as much an Omani as Sultan Qaboos Bin-Said himself.

"Put everyone out of their misery," the major said.

It was only when he spoke English that those who did not know him realised he did not, in fact, have the slightest trace of Arabic blood in his veins. A fact he actually regretted.

He added: "Remind Dherdhir to follow our lead. I don't want any accidents this time. I want them in the trap *before* I close the door."

Corporal Hamish McDermid smiled. There was no danger of that. 'The Hawk' had made it plain to the unit of regular Sultan's Armed Forces, and their irregular Dhofari guides, that there was to be no repeat of the last time. There was still some antagonism between SAF troops and the Dhofaris which tempted them to outdo each other. That was how the last mistake had occurred.

The rivalry dated back to the early seventies when large numbers of Dhofari tribesmen had been formed into the Firqat Forces – 'firqat' meaning quite literally 'company'. Operating with the SAS, these irregulars had proved a potential weapon in the armoury of the Omani authorities. They had been spectacularly successful in the wild interior – to the chagrin of the regular SAF who had failed to establish themselves against an elusive enemy.

Although the Firqat Forces had now disbanded, their job done, enmity between the SAF and the few remaining firqat guides had not died. It was actually encouraged by some British officers on secondment to Oman, several of whom despised the tribesmen.

But not Major Hawksby who was idolised by the firqats. He actually enjoyed living, eating and sleeping alongside them. Their problems were his problems and, after a while, *vice versa*. He got things done for them because he had the ear of men in high places. He cared for them. In return they respected him, not least because they admired his qualities as a leader and a soldier. That was why they had been uncharacteristically quiet after the fiasco two weeks earlier.

They had been operating on a similar joint patrol from one of their bases, a high fortress of natural rock overlooking the stony desert in the west. Reports had come in of a column of men moving through the network of wadis on the jebel

plateau. The ambush was expertly laid. Patiently they waited. For hours under the blistering sun. Then, in his enthusiasm, a firqat solider had opened fire prematurely against the infiltrators from neighbouring South Yemen. The enemy had bolted, leaving the major empty-handed and the firqats somewhat shamefaced.

The danger now, decided McDermid, was that both the SAF and firqats would leave it too late to open fire.

As the Scotsman disappeared from view, Hawksby slipped farther back into the discreet shadow of an overhang on the outcrop.

It was strange, he reflected, that today's action was a direct legacy of one of Britain's most successful but least-known military operations. Whilst the Americans had been winding down their unhappy anti-guerilla war in Vietnam, the British Army Training Team – or BATT as they were known to the firqats – had been stepping up theirs in support of the Sultan of Oman. From 1970 to 1976 the men from 22 Special Air Service Regiment who formed the BATT had been waging a war of similarity, if not of scale. But the results had been markedly different.

In July 1970 the tyrannical Sultan Said bin Taimur of Oman was deposed by his son. The young Qaboos had been educated in Britain and had passed through the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst to be commissioned in the British Army. During this time his father had continued his despotic rule, which only helped to create the very threat he was trying to crush by ruthless means. Western goods and clothes were banned, and dancing, music and smoking were strictly prohibited on pain of prison or flogging. As collective reprisals, village wells were often filled in, with horrifying results.

There was a seething resentment amongst the down-trodden Dhofari tribesmen on the mountainous jebel interior that the Soviet Union was quick to exploit.

Department VIII of the KGB, responsible for the Middle East area, recognised the importance of this small country strategically placed alongside the jugular of the West's oil routes from the Gulf. They fuelled the explosive situation

with propaganda, intimidation, arms and training through the Soviet-backed regime in adjoining South Yemen.

The brave move by the young Qaboos in ousting his father in a virtually bloodless coup came almost too late. When he took power the only place safe from the Marxist rebels was the palace itself at Salalah. Already the country was overrun and the situation seemingly irretrievable.

What followed was to be a classic counter-revolutionary campaign, masterminded by the BATT and drawing on previous lessons learned in Malaya and Borneo.

It was a 'hearts-and-minds' job from the start. The primary key to all was the formation of local Firqat Forces of loyal tribesmen who, it was argued, would be fighting for their own home territory. But initially, it was the promise of water wells that won their loyalty, rather than any genuine belief in the new Sultan.

The fearsome warriors operated under BATT command and also provided much intelligence about their rebel brothers on the jebel. These adoo, or enemy, were trained at special camps in South Yemen, through which also passed recruits for virtually every terrorist organisation in the world, including the PLO, Baader-Meinhof and the IRA.

Next came two other key factors: Civil Action Teams to bring water, medicine and schooling to the barren interior; and a constant flow of truthful counter-propaganda to convince the adoo that the new Sultan really meant to keep his promises. The CATs were also run by the SAS, assisted by more British servicemen who were seconded from other supporting units to provide transport, engineering, medical and veterinary expertise. It was a proven boast at Hereford that the regiment had saved countless more Omani lives than it had killed enemy.

Slowly, but surely, the plan worked, as more and more adoo came across to join the Firqat Forces. Over six years the firqats and small BATT teams, together with the regular Sultan's Armed Forces, gradually forced their way back onto the jebel from the south and east. And, as they re-established their presence in each sector, so the Civil Action Teams followed close on their heels. Eventually they pushed out the

last rebel strongholds, back over the western frontier to South Yemen.

That, Hawksby recalled, was four years ago. And now, increasingly, those who had fled earlier to the Yemen were learning of the new Oman and returning for a better way of life. It gave him an immense feeling of satisfaction. Unlike so many Third World countries, the Omanis had done it for themselves – with a little help from their friends. At one time there had been a full squadron of eighty SAS men, now there were only a handful. Some were on secondment, like Hawksby, as liaison officers; others were on contract.

Suddenly two dark figures appeared around the junction between the tributary finger-wadi and the main river bed. Their outlines were stark against the sun-bleached rock. Hawksby raised his binoculars. Two women. Returning refugees or infiltrators? That was the problem. The Soviets never gave up. Having been defeated in conventional warfare, the Marxists were now starting to plant 'sleepers' who they hoped would burrow into the Omani community. The Lenin School at Al Ghayda still managed to turn revolutionaries off its production-line at a frightening rate.

Guerilla wars seldom had tidy endings and Oman was no exception. There were still stubborn and isolated groups of adoo virtually cut off in the jebel. They had no popular support so their existence was an unenviable and uncomfortable business. Nevertheless they still managed to cause trouble while the smallest trickle of supplies was getting through.

"What d'ye reckon, boss?" He hadn't heard McDermid's return. "Old Dherdhir reckons they're women and swears they're adoo."

Hawksby's beard parted to reveal a white grin. Firqat vision without binoculars never ceased to amaze him. But he had more doubts about their interpretation of what they saw. "Dherdhir always swears they're adoo. He misses the old days of the real shooting war."

McDermid gave an ironic smile. "Don't we all."

It was a tactless thing for the Scotsman to say. He knew the major deeply regretted having missed the main campaign. If

he'd forgotten Hawksby's feelings on the subject, the brittle silence that followed reminded him.

Again Hawksby brought the binoculars up to his eyes. Finally he said: "Here come the rest of them."

Below, a plodding train of humanity trudged out of the finger-wadi. Men, women and some children. There were also half-a-dozen loaded donkeys and a small herd of scrawny goats.

Hawksby beckoned McDermid to his side. "Quick, Scottie, there's to be no shooting. I reckon these are returning refugees. Order the SAF and Dherdhir's men to approach with caution but not to open fire except in self-defence. We'll wait here in case of trouble."

McDermid nodded. For once the SAS philosophy 'Do unto others before they do unto you' was shelved. Dead civilians, accidental or otherwise, only served the enemy's cause.

In fifteen minutes it was all over. At a given signal the SAF troops and firqat guides emerged like wraiths from the rocks and shrubbery overlooking the wadi. Others approached the column from the front and more still came from the rear. The refugees froze in stunned horror. Despite the presence of the uniformed soldiers, the robes the firqats wore beneath their camouflage jackets made the refugees wonder if they were bandits. Hands moved slowly towards daggers and rifles.

Then Dherdhir, a big bull of a man, whose heavy silver belt emphasised the bulge of his stomach, strode forward in greeting, pushing aside his men and the SAF soldiers. It was a brave act that could have gone wrong if one of the refugees had panicked. As it turned out, it may have saved a needless massacre. Once he was amongst them the tension melted, the patrol lowered their arms, and the refugees relaxed. There were a dozen families and a few hangers-on from the same tribe. Tea was brewed and everyone began exchanging stories.

Yes, they'd fled in the early seventies. They had come because they knew that the stories of change and development were true, despite what they'd been told by the Yemeni authorities. They knew it was true because the Sultan's men

could not command the jebel without the firqats. And they would not support the Sultan unless there had been real changes.

Hawksby stretched out his legs and began to fill his clay pipe. He felt at home as he applauded the tribesmen for making the right decision to return.

A sudden commotion took him by surprise. A fight had broken out between one of the refugees and a firqat who had been conducting a search of the donkeys.

"An adoo courier," Dherdhir hissed in Hawksby's ear.

The major scrambled to his feet and swiftly defused the situation by assuring the tribesman that he would come to no harm. The young man's eyes were furtive and wild as he looked around.

Hawksby and McDermid exchanged glances with Dherdhir. They'd seen too many fanatical adoo over the years to have any doubts about *this* young refugee's loyalties.

The firqat handed Hawksby the Arabic order-papers that he had found on the donkey. The major glanced quickly over them. They detailed a secret cache of arms in the hill caves to the north. A powerful surprise offensive was planned. Dhjerdhir was grinning fixedly. Although he'd been wrong about the refugees, he'd been right about the adoo. A perfect face-saver.

"That'll make interesting reading for the Int. boys," Hawksby said. He handed the papers to McDermid for safe-keeping, turning as he heard an excited voice beyond the group of seated refugees. A shabbily-dressed mullah was talking in impassioned tones to a group of young Omanis and pointing at the white soldiers.

McDermid frowned. "Tha' holy man seems te have a bee in his bonnet aboot somethin'."

Dherdhir shrugged. "He is Persian. He is travelling with the refugees to pass on the message of Islam, on orders from the Imam in Teheran."

For a moment Hawksby studied the ranting words of the mullah. His audience seemed unsure. Traditionally, tribal loyalty meant more to Omanis than their Islamic religion, but that was slowly changing. As travel improved over the

new roads, the strength of ties to individual tribes would inevitably diminish. And what about these refugees, uncertain of their future? Perhaps they too would turn to Allah for comfort as the heady fire of Islamic fundamentalism swept through the Gulf from Iran.

"One of the Ayatollah's mob?" McDermid asked. "Spreading the gospel?"

Major Alan Hawksby nodded, solemnly. "What we've feared for the past eighteen months, Scottie, it's just beginning."

Part One

IN

CHAPTER ONE

TEHERAN: 0305 hrs, Monday 11th August, 1980

"Jon'i?" Eva Olsen was suddenly awake, her Norwegian accent heavy with sleep. "What iss it, Joni'i? What iss t'e matter?"

His whispered reply sounded loud in the absolute stillness of the darkened hotel bedroom. "Someone at the door."

"At t'is time?" She sounded incredulous. "It iss so late . . ."

Jonathan Blake glanced at the luminous face of his wristwatch. "Just gone three."

Beside him, Eva's naked body tensed with alarm. They had both heard stories about the nocturnal raids by revolutionary guards or, even worse, the zealots from the Centre for the Abolition of Sin whose mansion headquarters weren't a stone's throw from the hotel. But somehow Blake couldn't see them tapping meekly and waiting so patiently.

"You iss going to answer it?"

Blake reached for his dressing-gown lying on the bed. "I don't really think I've got much option."

The visitor was knocking again as Blake switched on the light.

"Jon'i, I'm scared."

Blake tried to look reassuring. It was unusual to see Eva anything less than brimming with self-confidence and bravado. Her nervousness now was just another symptom of the creeping paranoia and uncertainty that had paralysed Teheran since the triumphant return of the exiled Imam, Ayatollah Khomeini, earlier that year.

As Blake opened the door the movement and sudden brightness flooding into the dimly-lit corridor made the short

man jump. The swarthy skin beneath his thinning black hair glistened with tell-tale perspiration. He regained his composure and smiled, hesitantly.

"Mr. Blake?" Light glinted on his thick-lensed spectacles.

"Yes." The irritation in Blake's voice masked his own nervousness.

The little man looked apologetic. "Forgive me, Mr. Blake. This is truly an impertinence." He fingered the crocodile document case that he clutched in both hands. "I am sure you understand that I would not call at this unearthly hour without good reason . . ."

Now he knew there was no danger, Blake's instinctive journalistic curiosity took over. "Don't I know you?"

The man looked genuinely pleased to be recognised. "We see each other on several occasions. At the Imam's home in Qum and more recently at his daughter's house. My name is Karemi. Sabs Karemi."

"You're on Khomeini's staff?"

A slightly indignant expression passed over Karemi's face. "It has been my honour to serve as an adviser to the Revolution for Islam."

Blake scratched his head. He still found Iranians every bit as inscrutable as the Orientals.

"But please," Karemi continued hurriedly, "is it possible that I could intrude on your tolerance just a little longer? In private? It would be dangerous for me to be seen here."

Blake hesitated. Despite the inevitable Persian courtesy, Sabs Karemi was obviously a very nervous man. Behind the glasses his eyes pleaded.

Reluctantly Blake stepped aside. "I'm sure this must be very important . . ."

Karemi needed no second bidding. "Blessings for your kindness," he muttered as he stepped quickly out of the corridor. Blake glanced outside, up and down the length of the well-worn carpet. He could see no one lurking in the shadows.

"May the Holy Prophet forgive me! To come between a man and his wife!"

Blake turned as he closed the door. With her usual childish

disregard for modesty, Eva was sitting naked on the bed, her legs curled elegantly beneath her. The long, pale hair framed a puzzled expression.

Angrily Blake snatched the red silk kimono from the bottom of the bed and thrust it at her. "For God's sake, Eva, show some respect for the poor man's feelings!"

She glared at him. "I am not expecting unannounced visitors, Jonat'on!" The way she rolled her tongue around his full Christian name, which she had difficulty in pronouncing, emphasised her annoyance.

He ignored her, returning quickly to Karemi. He was about to assure him that they were not married, when he thought better of it. Morality was a touchy subject in Iran nowadays. Instead he just said: "Feel no embarrassment, my friend. You interrupted nothing."

In fact, as he stood strategically in front of her while she dressed, Blake was more than a little irritated. Eva Olsen was one of the most sensual and sensational women he had ever met. She was the epitome of the cool Nordic blonde. If he had been describing her for the popular press back home he would have called her 'mean, moody and magnificent'. Although her body was almost painfully slim, to model-girl proportions, she still exuded an animal magnetism of universal appeal. Even the Iranians, who traditionally favoured meatier fare, seemed mesmerised when she walked by. It was something in the way she moved, with a tantalising colt-like elegance. And the way her small jutting breasts shifted freely beneath the thin cheesecloth shirts she always wore. In short, press photographer Eva Olsen – daughter of a leading Norwegian publisher – was the sort of girl that every man admired and yet hated. Unless she was his.

Almost anywhere else in the world Blake would have been proud to have her by his side. But in the revolutionary Iran of 1980 she was a downright liability.

Blake offered Sabs Karemi a seat and fetched a bottle of warm lemonade and two tooth mugs from the adjoining bathroom. "It's all the hospitality I can offer you," he apologised. He didn't mention the bottle of Scotch beneath the mattress; you couldn't be too careful.

The Iranian raised his hand. "May your kindness be rewarded on earth. You have already done too much. Let me, please, explain my intrusion. Then I can leave you in peace."

Blake couldn't resist a smile. No matter how harassed, the ordinary Iranian was incapable of dropping the traditional poetic courtesies of his language. It was all part of the natural warmth and charm that had cast a spell over him on his first visit to Teheran, five years earlier, as a junior reporter for the 'Insight' television news team. He had been surprised to discover the innate Persian hospitality, most noticeable away from the big cities. Steeped in a gentle religious tradition, the average Iranian would instinctively offer free refreshment and words of welcome to any traveller or stranger, no matter how poor the host. God, as always, had provided and it was only expected that much good fortune should be shared.

It was hardly the view of the nation held by the world at large, especially since the Shah had fled the country. But it was the face of Iran that Blake was determined the hostile outside world should know. When they were ready to look.

"You know the Imam well?" Karemi asked suddenly. Obviously he was more anxious than he pretended.

Blake nodded. "You know that, my friend. I consider myself privileged to be one of the few Western reporters to enjoy the Ayatollah's confidence. I do my best to explain the case for the Islamic Revolution"

"Quite so. It is my understanding that you have respect for the words of the Holy Prophet and the need for us to cleanse ourselves of centuries of influence from outsiders."

Blake was becoming impatient. "Look, Sabs – if I may call you Sabs? You know all about me, my faith in the Revolution and your people. But I know nothing about you, except that I've seen you in the Ayatollah's entourage. You're not a cleric?"

Krami smiled graciously. "No, I am not a religious man or a scholar. I am but a humble practitioner of law. I was part of the team which was working on the case for the extradition of the traitorous Shah. You know of this huge work?"

Blake nodded. He was well aware of the confusing, hastily-

prepared 450-page dossier for the Panamanian government, intended to persuade them of the justification of extraditing the sick Shah. Under orders from Khomeini's Revolutionary Council, a team had been assembled to wring specific allegations from a mountain of seized government papers and financial records. The investigation had involved the Ministry of the Interior, which prepared details of SAVAK's unpleasant excesses under the Shah, the Foreign and Finance Ministries, and the Office of the Minister of the Imperial Court.

It had been a momentous undertaking that should have received years of painstaking research, checking and cross-referencing. By the time it was translated into French and then into Spanish, it was an even more incomprehensible mess. More importantly, it had missed the deadline set by Panama. To the world at large it looked like just one more example of Iranian bungling.

"I sympathise," Blake said truthfully. "It was an impossible job you set yourselves."

"With God's help, even the impossible is possible," Karemi replied evenly. "And it was under God's guidance, as I toiled, that I discovered papers that I wished I had not found."

"From t'e offices of t'e Shah?" It was Eva who spoke. She sat on the edge of the bed, long legs akimbo, toying absently with the expensive Leicaflex camera on her lap. The Iranian turned quickly, pleased at the opportunity to look on such forbidden Western beauty. "From the Shah's offices, yes, but also from SAVAK and the new administration."

He missed the faint, metallic click, but Blake didn't. One sixtieth at F1.7, he guessed, on Tri-X uprated to 1600 ASA. It was that sort of superb skill that won his professional admiration of the girl, despite his frequent irritation at her manner. It was a skill that had resulted in some of the most telling pictures to come out of Iran.

She hadn't even been looking at her subject as the shutter went; she was reaching for a pack of cigarettes.

"And you 'af discovered somet'ing in t'ese papers t'at you iss not expecting?" Her voice was clipped and calculating,

exaggerating her difficulty with the pronunciation of *th*. The cigarette hung impudently from her lips, unlit.

Karemi felt under pressure and he didn't like it. Uncertainty flickered in his eyes.

"Look," Blake said. "I'm afraid you've just got to decide whether or not you can trust us." He was tired. His brain was cranking around with excruciating slowness and this whole nocturnal visit was beginning to seem preposterous. Unless, of course, he was being set up by someone. "Now, Sabs, just *what* is so important about your discoveries?"

Karemi hesitated for a moment then, as though suddenly coming to a momentous decision, he slapped the crocodile case on the coffee table in front of him. "It is all in here. Copies of documents and papers from many sources. A – how you say? – jigsaw which makes very unhappy reading. Evidence that does your own Satanic Government in Britain little credit. But, more important, evidence that heaps the shame of treachery on the Imam himself!"

"Khomeini?" Blake was astounded.

He exchanged glances with Eva. No wonder the Iranian was skulking about in the middle of the night like a frightened rabbit. He was evidently an intelligent man whose eminence as a lawyer was obvious by the fact that he d been involved at all in the anti-Shah investigation. If he had unearthed material that was genuinely detrimental to Khomeini, he had every reason to be nervous. His indecision about sharing that information with strangers was totally understandable. Why he should even want to, though, was not.

Blake leaned forward. "What exactly is this connection between the British Government and Khomeini that's so earth shattering?"

"It is all in there. It is much too complicated to explain. But it is evidence that the Imam has betrayed his principles and his people. That, far from breaking away from foreign interference, he has allowed himself to be manipulated." He indicated the case on the table. "The evidence is all there."

"Written evidence?" Eva asked.

"Yes." Flatly.

"If this is true," Blake said slowly, "then why are you telling me? Your precious Revolution is likely to collapse around your ears."

"Alas, Mr. Blake, it is no longer *my* Revolution." He smiled uncomfortably. "Like most of my fellow countrymen, I loathed the regime of the Shah and supported the return of the Imam. Indeed, perhaps we welcomed him too blindly. We did not expect him to attract the worst zealots of Islam, many just interested in grabbing power and riches for themselves, like moths around a Holy candle.

"Everyone pledging allegiance to the Imam is acceptable. They persecute and terrorise in his Holy name. They quench their desire for revenge. Even the Palestine Liberation Organisation and ex-SAVAK policemen may join in the purge of anyone who has the vaguest connections with the West."

He looked at Eva and blinked hard. She noticed that the skin below his eyes was red and glistening. "The finger has even been pointed at me, for I number men from many nations amongst my friends . . . So I turned my back on them. For the sake of my family I have to. That has never been the teaching of Islam. But the Imam does not seem aware of this blasphemy. In fact he encourages it."

Karemi appeared to regain his composure as he continued: "The Imam seems to have his own interpretation of good and evil. Since he has imprisoned the people from the American embassy, all foreign aid and investment has dried up. Prices of everything soar like a bird. There are few eggs and little meat in the markets. No oil to cook with . . . Now many people are without work. That is why there are such crowds at the marches and demonstrations . . ."

"Look, Sabs," Blake said, "I can understand why you are a disillusioned man, but what makes you think I'm interested in these papers of yours? At the moment I'm able to get the sort of stories from Khomeini that other reporters would give their right arms for. I can demand any price I like for them on the open market. I've got dual nationality, which means that your Revolutionary Council can address themselves to my Swiss half and ignore the Satanic British bit. I've got it all

going for me. Why the hell should I give it all up by getting involved with this yarn of yours?"

Karemi leaned forward so that his face was only a few inches from Blake's. His breath smelled faintly of sugared almonds. "You are a left-winger, are you not?" He nodded towards Eva. "And your wife?"

Blake raised an eyebrow. "We're both socialists, yes."

"And therefore it follows that you support the Mojahedin?"

"No it does not follow!" Blake was angry at the man's simplistic assumption. "We support no special faction in this country. We like the people and I like what Khomeini set out to do. Including kicking out the Yanks."

"And you think the Imam's Revolution succeeds."

Blake hesitated. "No, not yet. It's a mess, we all know that. But all revolutions take time. They need a period of settlement and adjustment."

Karemi said. "I am afraid I cannot wait that long, Mr Blake. I subscribe to your entire notion, but I fear for my wife and daughter. I am taking my family away."

Blake was surprised. "When?"

"Tomorrow, God willing."

The journalist's eyes narrowed. "Does no one know Eva and I leave for Switzerland tomorrow?"

Karemi smiled apologetically. "That is why I am here. To enlist your help. When you read the contents of the papers I think you will change your mind about this accursed Revolution. With regard to your present success with writing about the Imam's regime . . ." He held Blake's gaze unblinkingly ". . . The story you will now have to tell will make you a journalistic celebrity world-wide and probably give you a fortune to match."

Eva leaned over Blake's shoulder and studied the Iranian opposite. "And what is it that you are wanting us to do? To take out your precious document for you?" she asked.

A row of bright white teeth broke through the tense, perspiring face. "Not for me, Mrs. Blake. For Persia."

Outside the crumbling baroque facade of the Masnava Hotel, a red Peykan car was parked beneath the avenue of plane trees with its lights off. Inside an observer watched as one of the ornate double doors opened and a small man in a blue suit trotted down seven steps to the empty street. After glancing nervously to right and left, he stepped into the shadows and melted into the night.

Five minutes later the watcher climbed out of his car and walked slowly towards the telephone box situated a little farther up the street, outside a deserted tea-house. He picked up the receiver and dialled 112. When the police telephonist replied, he gave his pass code-number and asked to be put through to Colonel Najaf Murad.

Patiently the watcher waited while the call was re-routed through to the new SAVAMA headquarters, the replacement security apparatus for the SAVAK secret police. Still in its infancy, the new organisation was poorly administered and had yet to draw its teeth. But no one doubted that under its director Hussein Fardoust, an ex-SAVAK officer who had wisely changed sides, it would soon become as ruthless and depraved as its predecessor.

Colonel Najaf Murad, too, had served under the Shah. Now a quickly-reformed character, he headed a special section with exclusive responsibility for internal security of the ruling Revolutionary Council itself.

At last the watcher got through. "Yes, Colonel, he has now left the hotel. He did not have the document case with him." He listened for a moment, then hung up.

Lights came on in the tea-house as the owner stirred and began to prepare for the first customers of the day. To the north the towering outline of the magnificent Elburz mountains began to stand out in relief against a lightening sky.

Quickly the watcher returned to the red Peykan.

As it drove off, the man who had been watching the watcher stepped from the shadowy doorway of a second-hand shoe shop. He, too, knew that Sabs Karemi no longer had his crocodile document case.

The orange taxi swerved, braked hard and hooted its way through the crowded streets towards the airport.

Normally Blake would have enjoyed the hot and jolting trip, despite the discomfort, as he watched the fascinating mix of modern and ancient worlds jerk past like images from an early movie camera. A dented Mercedes growled angrily behind a weary column of unheeding donkeys; coppersmiths' workshops, bakeries and bazaars bustled on as usual in the lee of overshadowing modern office blocks; brown-cloaked mullahs jostled alongside long-robed merchants, students in jeans, and *chador*-masked women.

It was a world that had once captivated him, but today he stared out of the fly-splattered window, unblinking and unseeing. Nerves seemed to twist his intestines until they felt like knotted tree roots.

"You look worried, Jon'i." He felt Eva's hand on his thigh, reassuring.

He forced a smile. She looked as imperturbable as ever, her flowing blonde hair tucked beneath a silk scarf, her slender body cool in a white cotton drill shirt and knee-length skirt. For once unprovocative.

The amused look in those wide blue eyes irritated him. "I don't find it particularly funny, Eva. We've got plenty to worry about. And you more than me?"

She smiled and looked out of the window. "It iss my secret, Jon'i. Mine and yours. And no one iss going to know unless you tell t'em . . ." She turned back to face him. "Unless you give it all away by acting like a frightened child."

The gross driver, whose buttocks overflowed his seat, swung the fur-covered steering wheel and turned his taxi unnecessarily into Taleghani Avenue, recently re-named after a revered Muslim cleric. Unnecessary, because it wasn't on their direct route, but expected because it took them past the gates of the now world-famous American Embassy.

"Hey, see!" he bellowed. "This is the embassy of the Great Satan! This is the American spy centre where they plot against us! *Allahu akbar*!" He sounded jubilant but, as they passed the high walls, the scene was very much an anti-

climax. The humiliated hostages had long since been moved, scattered in houses and prisons, many in other cities, and now only a small cluster of students and revolutionary guards hung around the gateway.

Nevertheless the sight had emphasised the danger of their own position. One slip now, and the two of them could share the same uncertain fate. Glancing at Eva, sitting cool and composed, Blake wondered if she had any nerves at all. Perhaps it was just imagination she lacked. For once he wished he did too.

Mehrabad International Airport is situated to the south-west of Teheran, encircled by ugly ranks of pre-cast apartment developments. It was outside one of the French-designed terminal buildings that the orange taxi squealed finally to a halt. As Blake and Eva struggled with their luggage through the plate glass doors they were immediately aware of the tense atmosphere. Fear hung so heavily in the air that they could almost smell it. There was none of the hustle and excited chatter usually found in airport departure areas. There were queues everywhere, winding in confused snakes across the vast tiled floor. But the seething mass of people was strangely hushed and expectant, like a column of mourners entering a mausoleum. It was unnerving. Only the children seemed unaware, scampering about in a make-believe world, their voices shrill in the echoing quietness of the place.

Eva smiled at the pinched, worried faces in a group of would-be travellers, vainly reassuring. They smiled back nervously and shrugged.

"It looks like t'ey play travellers' roulette," she observed quietly.

"Thank God we're not included in it," Blake replied, dropping their cases at the end of a long switchback queue to the passport desk.

Ever since the obsessive prosecutors in Teheran had declared their belief that pro-Shah counter-revolutionaries were smuggling out the country's wealth, travel for middle-class Iranian nationals had become decidedly hazardous. The airport's self-appointed Revolutionary Committee

would wait like vultures for the people on their blacklist: those who had refused to contribute to the Revolution's 'Foundation for the Oppressed'. At the airport there was little chance of escaping the net, because Iranians intending to travel were first required to hand in their passports, several days in advance, with an application for an export visa. Only on the day of their flight did the would-be passengers discover if they were free to go. First the baggage check, then through the security gate, hopefully to pick up a passport. If it was not there, the traveller was immediately arrested and escorted to prison. It was a particularly spiteful manifestation of the corruption of absolute anarchic power.

Eva and Jonathan fell into a sullen silence with the others, shuffling slowly forward every few minutes for the next half-hour.

Suddenly a commotion broke out at the head of the queue. A small round man wearing a blue suit and spectacles was protesting loudly. From the angry gabble of Farsi, Blake realised that a passport was being withheld.

Eva nudged him. "Jon'i!" she whispered. "isn't t'at Sabs Karemi?"

"Sssh!" Blake hissed. "Don't draw attention to us."

She peered ahead as two men strutted forward from a slovenly group of revolutionary guards who had been standing around chatting and smoking. "It iss, Jon'i! T'e poor man! And, look, t'e woman in t'e red dress. T'at must be 'is wife. Wit' t'e little girl!"

"Eva, *please*!" Imploring.

Amidst howls of noisy protest, mostly from the woman in the red dress, Sabs Karemi and his wife were summarily arrested and force-marched into a side office. For a moment the daughter was forgotten, left standing in a state of childish panic before one of the guards turned back. He scooped her into his arms and followed after the others.

Blake looked sideways at Eva. Her face was deathly pale.

No one took any notice of them when they reached the passport desk. But the baggage search was a distinctly unnerving experience. Blake had no need to take out his notebook; he kept all relevant facts and information in

his head. After all this time he knew Iran as well as he knew his native country. But Eva needed film and she watched, without expression, as the wall-eyed guard seized the rolls of Kodachrome she had wrapped in a pile of underclothes.

The lure had worked; the fascination of running his rough fingers through the silky soft material, that had been in intimate contact with such an attractive Western woman, proved too much.

"Please," she said quietly. "I iss a photographer. T'ose films iss my livelihood. T'e world wants to know of t'e progress of your Great Revolution."

Behind the wall-eyed guard, his unkempt, blue-chinned companion leered at the distinct outline of her brassiere through the thin material of her drill shirt.

"You want to tell the world, eh, lady?" said Wall-eye. "You tell them Ali says we managed for centuries without photographers. And we certainly don't need photographs from your damn American friend, Mr. Kodak."

Ali turned to his blue-chinned friend Iraj for recognition of his ready wit. He got it.

"I don't like America either," Eva replied, unperturbed, "and I 'af great faith in your Revolution. But I *need* my film in order to live."

"Ah, but God will provide!" said Ali, his eye suddenly fixing on the three camera cases around her neck. "You are a smart lady, yes? You take three pictures at once, eh?"

Iraj belly-laughed. Blake ground his teeth.

"Three cameras is a lot for one lady," Ali continued with a fixed smile. "Especially when a camera can save much precious film . . ." He grasped the rolls of film in his hand and held it out tantalisingly.

She exchanged glances with Blake, who nodded grimly. She shrugged and unlooped the strap of the battered 35 mm Leicaflex. Ali's smile widened as he reached out to take it: his attempt to charm her was spoiled by his yellowing teeth.

"I take pictures, too!" Iraj cried suddenly.

Ali pointed at the Hasselblad. "One lady one camera, eh? And much film, much money, eh?"

Eva raised an eyebrow, wondering if the confiscation

would be covered by her insurance policy, as she handed that over too. "And now you give me back my film?"

"Sure, sure," Ali replied gleefully, as he handed the camera to his companion. "We do not steal. It is against the law of Islam."

He made them wait another two minutes while he carefully unravelled each roll, held it up to the light, and proclaimed it 'innocent'.

He handed back the twisted coils of useless celluloid with an ingratiating smile. "Thank you, lady. You have taken no wickedness with your camera and you make a most generous gift to the Revolution! *Allahu akbar*!"

As they left to go to the counter to collect their Swissair tickets, Eva snorted: "Bloody little creep!" Only her accent softened the angry tone of her voice.

Blake didn't trust himself to speak. He just took a deep breath, thankful to get on to the security door for yet another check and to join the next queue building up for the Emigration desk.

An alert-looking middle-aged man in the crisply-pressed blue uniform of the National Police was scrutinising each passport with agonising thoroughness. It was quite noticeable that the scruffy armed guard beside him was interested only in Iranian nationals. One unfortunate, evidently identified as part of the bourgeoisie by his suede overcoat and gold wristwatch, was plucked away from his wife and young son. If he wished to rejoin them there would be a heavy 'contribution' to be made to the Revolution.

Blake shivered as he pushed forward. Next came the policeman in the glass booth who got the queue moving again as he rapidly examined passports, tickets and visas, and brought down his exit stamp with a flourish.

It was with sheer relief that they finally joined the tense, milling crowds in the Departure Lounge. Over the tannoy came an announcement for passengers for the Swissair flight to Zurich to make their way to the boarding gate. Through the window they could see the grubby blue airport bus waiting to take them to the aircraft. Here, everyone seemed happier, despite the fact that the place was littered with

guardsmen in their Korean-made field-jackets and with anonymous agents of the Revolutionary Committee. All the time watching, waiting. A knowing look. A laugh that was too nervous . . . that was all it took. And every passenger knew it.

But as the crowd funnelled towards the gate, Blake and Eva exchanged glances, and smiled. They'd done it.

"Mr. Blake?"

His blood froze.

"Keep moving," Eva urged.

"Mr. Blake and Miss Olsen! If you please."

There was no way they could ignore the iron-haired man of military bearing who stood at the checkout desk. Behind him, their arms smugly crossed, waited Ali and Iraj.

Eva faltered. Blake's eyes were drawn towards the man in the smart grey mohair suit. His well-manicured hand stretched out for the passports, visas and tickets. "We'll look after those for you, shall we?" He stepped forward. "My name is Colonel Murad. I am security adviser to the Revolutionary Council."

Eva stood naked and defiant before the two women dressed from head to toe in black robes. Her lips were bloodless and pressed tight as their fingers probed and explored. One of them, her bright coal eyes gleaming behind a *chador* mask, pinched her breast maliciously.

Two tears rolled slowly down her cheeks until she could taste the salt. Still she did not flinch. Her clothes, each seam now carefully razored for concealed items, were thrown at her feet, and she was ordered to dress.

Then one of the women called out and Iraj came in, smirking as the Norwegian tried to button her ragged drill shirt. He was ushered out by the women and returned a few moments later with Blake. Judging by his dishevelled and uneasy appearance, Eva guessed that he had suffered a similar body search.

"You okay, love?" he asked.

She blinked away the tears from her eyes and smiled weakly. She couldn't speak, but anyway one of the women

nudged her with the barrel of a sub-machine gun. "Silence!" she spat.

At that moment Colonel Murad entered and the guards fell silent as he looked at the two prisoners in turn. When he spoke his voice reminded Blake of a heel being slowly ground in gravel. "You have both been arrested on very serious charges. Espionage and subversion against the state of Iran. You know what that means, don't you?"

Blake blustered: "I've told you a thousand times, we've done *nothing*!"

Murad continued, unperturbed. "We have information that you were brought a number of secret documents in your hotel room last night, and are attempting to smuggle them out for publication in the West to create a scandal for our country."

The journalist shook his head. "Rubbish! It's rubbish! I'm a friend – well, confidant, of the Imam himself. I've worked in this country on and off for five years. I *love* the place! I've a reputation here, a good one. The Imam likes my stories and the world wants to hear them. And that means a lot of money to me. Why the hell should I blow all that?"

Murad looked impassive.

Eva said: "You 'af found not'ing, alt'ough your witches 'af search very damn t'orough . . ."

The colonel raised his hand. "The guards realised that you deliberately stored film on top of your luggage so it would be found. Now we have, as suspected, found more film in the bottom lining of your case . . ."

Eva tried to sound exasperated. "T'ings iss always slipping down t'ere. It's torn."

"Perhaps, Miss Olsen, but it makes us very suspicious. Last night you were given state documents. Today you try to leave the country. And the documents . . ." He opened his hands forward, palms up. ". . . nowhere to be seen. Now, it follows that, if you are not trying to smuggle them out, you two know where they are. And you two alone."

Eva tried to speak, but the words caught in her throat.

"I now have no alternative but to report to my superiors in the Revolutionary Council. While they decide what is to be

done with you, you will be held in custody at Ghasr Jail . . ."

"For God's sake!" blurted Blake. Somehow he had never visualised events taking such a turn. He knew of Ghasr. Everyone did. It was run by the dreaded Khalkali. Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkali, the merciless Islamic judge who had made himself known to the world at large when he had gleefully waved bits of dismembered American bodies at the television cameras after the abortive rescue attempt in April.

Colonel Murad turned abruptly and left the small security room. A few moments later the revolutionary guards had handcuffed journalist Jonathan Blake and press photographer Eva Olsen and had marched them brusquely through the door. In the empty room a copy of the ubiquitous poster of a demonic-looking Ayatollah Khomeini glared down with stern approval.

CHAPTER TWO

LONDON: 2000 hrs, Friday 15th August

For a full five minutes the figure stood at the fifth-floor window of the twenty-storey Century House office block in Westminster Bridge Road. Thoughtfully he watched as a train wormed its way out of Waterloo Station at the start of its run to the south coast.

He glanced at his watch. Eight o'clock.

Now would be a good time, he decided. At least as good a time as any. If ever there could be a good time to bring such news to the attention of the Prime Minister.

But something had to be said about the top-secret report from the Deputy Head of the Directorate of Production 2, the Middle East section, that now rested on the kidney-shaped desk behind him.

He just hoped that no decision on action would be taken, despite the urgent demands of the Deputy Head of DP2 himself. It wasn't the first time they had disagreed and neither would it be the last. Anyway, once it was with the PM, the decision could go either way – his way with any luck.

Then the Director-General of the Secret Intelligence Service, otherwise known as DI6, or more popularly MI6, made a decision.

Reaching for the intercom, he buzzed his secretary. "*Sir Arthur?*"

"Rosemary, be kind enough to get the Cabinet Secretary and tell him that 'C' requests an urgent meeting with the PM, will you? Either tomorrow morning, or before close of play tonight if it's more convenient."

"*Very well, Sir Arthur.*"

The meeting was to be that night. Matters of state security were ones to which the Prime Minister always gave the highest priority. Besides she enjoyed 'C's company: he was a dedicated Establishment man and shared her views concerning the prominent role Britain could still play in world affairs.

She awaited the arrival of the spymaster in the empty magnificence of the Cabinet Room on the second floor, seating herself at the long polished table by the fireplace. Above her hung an oil portrait of Britain's first Prime Minister, Robert Walpole.

Scarcely had she settled down when the Secretary to the Cabinet entered and announced a soberly-dressed Director-General of the SIS. Punctual as always.

"Hallo, Dickie," she said as he sat down next to her.

"Good evening, Prime Minister," replied Sir Arthur formally, ever mindful that familiarity was best avoided on such delicate occasions.

"And what has 'The Firm' been up to that warrants such urgent consultation?" She smiled. "Do I smell trouble abroad in the air?"

"At the moment, ma'am, it is just that. A mere whiff of trouble that may come to nothing."

"And what part of the world are we talking about?"

"Iran, ma'am, I'm afraid."

The Prime Minister's eyes flickered with interest. "I appreciate that there is unlikely to be anything other than bad news coming from that unhappy country for a while."

"You're so right, ma'am. In fact, it would appear that another British hostage has been taken," replied Sir Arthur, his voice deliberately flat. "I only heard two hours ago. Our man has been trying to get a message out since it happened five days ago."

The Prime Minister shook her head slowly. "Who is it this time? Another missionary?"

"No, ma'am, a journalist called Jonathan Blake. You may have heard of him. He used to be a regular reporter on the 'Insight' television programme, but lately he's been writing

more frequently for left-wing magazines here and in Europe. Became a bit of an expert on Iranian affairs."

She nodded. "Yes, I know him. In fact some of his articles were brought to my attention last year." She paused, frowning. "But, if I recall correctly, he was basically pro-Khomeini. I seem to remember him giving quite a lucid explanation about things from the Iranian viewpoint. So why arrest him?"

Sir Arthur raised an eyebrow. "That is precisely what concerns me, ma'am. You see, one of our few remaining men in Iran has been seeking out new contacts, which is particularly difficult in a country where so many are being put before the firing squad or imprisoned for no apparent reason. One such man is a lawyer and legal consultant to Khomeini's Revolutionary Council, who is believed to have connections with the Mojahedin opposition movement. He had been involved in preparing the case against the Shah for extradition proceedings and therefore had access to many sensitive documents from several sources. Apparently he has stumbled across some evidence related to what we know as Operation Fulcrum."

The furrows deepened on the Prime Minister's brow. She had come across mention of it only occasionally in the yellow dispatch boxes that contained matters of intelligence, and had questioned its significance when she had first come to Number 10. "Dickie, you assured me that the matter was dead and buried." It was a statement, not a question.

He smiled thinly. "Oh yes, the operation was cancelled back in '78 when it had obviously become too successful. As you say, dead and buried. Unfortunately it doesn't prevent interested parties from exhuming the corpse."

The Prime Minister blanched. "And this Iranian is planning to conduct a post-mortem? My God, I certainly hope not!"

Sir Arthur tried to look confident but, under the Premier's penetrating gaze, he failed miserably. "Apparently he is now thoroughly disillusioned with Khomeini's regime and sees the publication of the details of Fulcrum as a means of bringing it down . . ."

"And us, too," the Prime Minister interrupted testily.

The Director-General of SIS continued, undeterred. "That is where our journalist friend comes in. The Iranian visited Blake the night before his arrest and, we surmise, persuaded him to smuggle the documents out of the country."

"But surely, if Blake is arrested, then it's too late to do anything about it? Details of Fulcrum will already be in the hands of Khomeini's people."

Sir Arthur raised his hand. "No, no. You see, our man followed the Iranian to his meeting with Blake at his hotel. Apparently he was also being shadowed by the secret police. But our man waited longer, in case Blake left the hotel and tried to make contact with someone else. In the event, he didn't, but about an hour after the Iranian left our man saw some movement in the alleyway beside the hotel. A sort of utility area where the waste bins are kept. Lo and behold, it was Blake. Our man took a look afterwards and found the relevant documents, torn to shreds and stuffed in amongst the kitchen garbage." Sir Arthur allowed himself a tight smile of self-congratulation. "Luckily, he had the good sense to destroy the evidence on the spot before the secret police decided to turn the hotel over – which they did after Blake was arrested at the airport."

The Prime Minister's eyes narrowed. "So you're saying that there is now no danger of Khomeini's people getting hold of the story?"

"Well not cohesive written evidence," the Director-General replied. "Not with the assembled document burnt."

"But what if Blake is made to talk? I understand their interrogation procedures can be pretty horrific."

"Ill-founded rumours about Fulcrum we can live with. Most accusations coming out of Teheran are treated as a joke. Besides, if Blake talks, it's likely to be the last thing he ever says. Khomeini won't want that story getting around. It would do him more damage than it would us."

"I doubt that," the Prime Minister observed bitterly. "But, tell me, Dickie, what will happen if Blake doesn't talk?"

"I suppose he could be left to rot for years. They don't

seem to be in such a hurry to let the Americans go. Or . . ." he hesitated. It was a mistake.

"Or he could eventually be released?" the Prime Minister suggested.

"Er, perhaps . . ."

"In which case we'd be faced with the difficult task of keeping him quiet about Fulcrum while in the full glare of the world's media!" She paused. "And I gather he's rather a determined and outspoken crusader against Western policy."

He shrugged. "If I may so say, ma'am, that's being a little speculative."

"It'll have to be considered eventually," she chided and then stared thoughtfully at the chandelier overhead. "What about the Iranian who put together the document? I suppose you won't tell me his name?"

Sir Arthur just smiled. It was traditional that the country's leader should never be concerned in details of espionage or even know the names of those involved in the elaborate maze of mirrors in which the world's secret services operate. "I don't recall his name, ma'am. But I can tell you that he committed suicide at Ghasr Jail the afternoon after his arrest. I gather they threatened to torture his wife and twelve-year-old daughter. He decided that a leap from the window would rather short-circuit their plans . . ."

"Good grief." The Prime Minister's eyes clouded and she shook her head slowly in disbelief. After a moment she said quietly, "The more I hear of events in that sad country, the more I am reminded of the terror of the Inquisition. All in the name of God and religion . . . I makes me sick to think of it. The moral is when you realise that genuine missionaries have been seized by these people."

The Director-General nodded sympathetically, although he had little time for anyone who wasted his life in the thankless task of spreading the gospel where it wasn't wanted. To his mind, the world's peasantry already put too much faith in God, and not enough in themselves. The Prime Minister might distinguish between the two, but the Director-General had as little time for fearless Christian missionaries as he did for zealous Islamic mullahs.

His thoughts were interrupted by the Prime Minister. "Tell me, Dickie, what are the chances that we could persuade Teheran to hand over Blake to us quietly and without fuss?"

"A secret transaction, ma'am?" Sir Arthur ran a hand through his straight, iron grey hair. "As the Iranian secret police already seem to have wind of this business, I'd think none at all. Even if they haven't discovered the full implications of Fulcrum, I can't see them co-operating. Khomeini's regime is a law unto itself. There is no influence we could bring to bear to guarantee a straightforward, let alone a covert transaction."

The chair scraped as the Prime Minister rose to her feet and moved towards the mantelpiece, her hands clasped together before her in a wringing motion. "You know, Dickie, I will not allow Britain to be caught in the same trap as the Americans. Since their failed rescue attempt, they have become a laughing stock . . ."

The Director-General felt increasing alarm at the way the conversation was going. "I am merely reporting, Prime Minister. I was not recommending any particular course of action."

Her eyes blazed at him from beneath the upswept golden hair. "But someone has to consider what action is to be taken, Dickie. As I understand it, you recommend that we leave Blake alone in the belief that, if Khomeini's people do find out about Fulcrum, they'll be as anxious as us to keep it quiet . . ."

"The truth would destroy Khomeini's regime." Emphatic.

". . . Ah, the truth. But as we well know, the Iranians are not beyond bending the truth a little to sound *very* different! However, it is just possible that they will discover nothing, in which case, at some future time Blake will be released and, I am sure, will take an understandable delight in revealing the whole sorry story to a stunned world. A story, I might add, that in the course of events would totally shatter our relations with the Americans, the rest of NATO and the EEC."

"You paint an over-pessimistic picture, ma'am . . ."

Slowly, she said: "What does your Middle East Section say, Dickie?"

Sir Arthur hesitated. With uncanny ease she'd found his weak spot. "Well, ma'am, I must confess that the Deputy Head wants Blake out, but I . . ."

"Ah," she said triumphantly, "so at least someone in your organisation's not willing to abdicate the responsibility of putting right the catastrophic results of their own actions."

"But, ma'am, I . . ."

"Does the Press know about Blake?" Demanding.

"No. He has dual nationality, but mostly travels under a Swiss passport. No one's picked up the story yet. That's probably why. Besides, just recently, he's been working mostly for European publications."

"Can you do anything to help keep the news secret?"

The Director-General considered for a moment. "I'm sure there is something. Perhaps we could have some false stories filed in his name. We know the papers he was under contract to. I'll look into it."

She nodded, temporarily satisfied, and looked up at Walpole's portrait. "How many hostages do we now have captive in Iran, Dickie?"

He caught his breath. "Ah, well. There are the Colemans. The missionary nurse Jean Waddell." He hesitated. "Oh, yes, and the businessman Andrew Pyke."

The Prime Minister turned to look down at him. "So our Mr. Jonathan Blake is the fifth."

Sir Arthur thought quickly. He did not want to get the Service enmeshed in any sort of rescue bid. If things went wrong, as they undoubtedly would with such a complex and dangerous mission, there was one scapegoat obvious even at this early stage. Him.

"Prime Minister," he said, slowly and clearly, "although we have contacts in Iran, we have no SIS field agents in the country capable of participating in active service."

"Oh, course not, Dickie." The lady's smile was absolutely charming. "Just be ready for a further meeting tomorrow with the Foreign Secretary and Sir Anthony."

The Director-General rose slowly from his seat. He was

unhappy. A meeting with both the Head of the Joint Intelligence Committee and the Foreign Secretary meant that the Prime Minister saw need for very positive action.

She held out her hand. "Till tomorrow, Dickie. The Secretary will let you know what time as soon as possible."

"Good night, Prime Minister."

"Good night, Dickie." She left him at the door and began making her way slowly back to her private study. As she moved down the corridor, deep in thought, her mind crowded with images of earlier that year.

It was April. The Iranian Embassy siege had just ended. She was sitting, cross-legged on the floor, ecstatically happy as she watched the video tape action replay. Enveloped in the boisterous and good-humoured atmosphere, she had been surrounded by popping beer cans and soldiers of what had, overnight, become the most famous regiment in the world.

As she entered the empty study and seated herself at the leather-backed swivel chair, she turned the question over in her mind. Was it feasible? Was it just remotely possible to succeed where the massed might of the United States had failed?

OMAN: 1830 hrs, Sunday 17th August

"Good grief, man! Heard you'd gone native, but I'd never have believed it."

Major Hawksby was unloading his kit from the Land Rover at the wadi encampment, when he heard the distinctive gruff voice behind him. He turned in surprise, feeling suddenly naked in the sleeveless goatskin coat he wore over khaki shorts. The muscles twitched at the corners of Hawksby's mouth in an unsure smile. It was not every day that the Old Man dropped in at a remote desert outpost several thousand miles from the Hereford base.

"Welcome, boss, this is an unexpected surprise."

The colonel of 22 Special Air Service Regiment extended a short muscular forearm. Hawksby shook his hand.

"S'ppose we shouldn't salute while you're wearing that

damn turban arrangement, eh?" quipped the CO. "Sorry to shake you out of your lethargy like this. I got in on that damn chopper you ordered up for the casualty."

Hawksby nodded towards the Sultan of Oman's Air Force Bell 214B that had come to rest farther down the dried-up river bed and where a litter was being loaded. "One of the firqats stopped one in the leg," he explained. "Nothing serious if we get him to Qaboos Hospital soon enough."

"Bloody uncomfortable ride," the Old Man complained. "I thought these Omani pilots were British trained."

"He is British, boss. On contract."

The Old Man grunted. "S'ppose he's gone native, too, has he?"

Hawskby smiled. "It happens if you stay out here too long. The sun gets to you."

"You were keen enough to get out here again." Challenging.

Hawksby slung the Bergen pack over his shoulder and began walking slowly towards the tents. "I love it, boss. Converted to the nomadic life. Fully paid-up converted Arabist, that's me."

"Looks like I arrived in the nick of time, then, doesn't it?"

Hawksby shuffled to a halt. The dust swirled up around them. "Sir?"

"This isn't a social call, Alan." There was a hard edge to the CO's voice. "Something's in the wind. Something big. And it needs special talents."

Hawksby watched him carefully, but the Old Man's face remained impassive. "It must be important, boss, to bring you all this way?"

"Yes. And a pleasant change it makes to get out of HQ. Chance to get the old knees brown too. Besides, I thought it best to see you here, in case you want to select some men from your team here."

Hawksby started to speak, but the Old Man raised a hand to silence him. "Let's walk, Alan, my legs are stiff after all those hours cramped in choppers and VC10s. Dump your kit and I'll explain."

They left the tents as the rotors of the SOAF Bell started

working up a minor sandstorm prior to its journey back to Salalah. It was a hard climb up the steep sides of the wadi to where a noble-looking firqat warrior with a white goatee beard crouched on picket duty, his black *bishte* flowing in the breeze beneath a camouflage jacket.

The CO looked out over the monotonous sea of dry, rolling rock. "So, Alan, that's about it. Plan for a raid into Iran to snatch a British prisoner from a Teheran jail. Singe the old Ayatollah's beard, so to speak." His grey eyes looked uncannily pale as he gazed into the shimmering northern sky. It was almost as though he was seeing the Iranian coast some thousand miles beyond the horizon of crumbling hills. "We've been ordered to make the fullest contingency plans, and by all accounts we need to treat it very seriously. Tricky job. And a bit of a challenge after all the trouble the Yanks had. I'm afraid it served to queer the pitch."

"But why me, boss?" Hawksby's penetrating eyes met the Old Man's.

"Do I have to spell it out? As you spent most of your childhood in Iran with your parents, you've a better knowledge of the place than anyone else in the regiment. And you've been on exercises with the Iranian Army since. Both there and here in Oman when the Shah sent his troops over to help out. In short, you know better than anyone how they *think*." He sounded irritated at Hawksby's lack of enthusiasm.

The major hesitated, choosing his words carefully. "Sir, you haven't yet had a chance to read my latest reports on the situation here. I've got details of a major infiltration planned by the adoo in six weeks' time."

The Old Man grunted. "The whole world knows South Yemen lost the war here back in '76. 'Pity *they* don't recognise it."

"They won't stop until the Russians stop paying out the roubles. And we know they won't ever stop that if they think there's the faintest chance of a return on their investment." Hawksby looked down at the ant-like figures in the wadi encampment below. "I'd like to ensure the Sultan's redevelopment plans for Dhofar have a chance to work without

the Russians stirring up trouble again . . . There must be half-a-dozen Farsi-speaking officers in the regiment able to handle this Iranian raid."

The CO's eyes were as hard as grey granite. "And there are *two dozen* able to handle your team here."

Hawksby opened his mouth and shut it again. The CO added: "If it's any consolation, Alan, we have information that Khomeini is planning to drag the rest of the Gulf into his blessed Islamic Revolution. There are already *agents provocateurs* at work in Saudi, Bahrain and other Islamic states. How long before he sets his sights on Oman with its loyalty to the West, do you think?"

Hawksby didn't reply. He knew that, as usual, the Old Man was right.

"You said two months, Alan?"

"Before the adoo offensive? Yes."

The colonel's granite face softened. "Then you'd better get cracking if you want to be back."

TEHERAN: 0800 hrs, Monday 18th August

Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini had been up an hour before the sun. As was his usual practice, he read the Koran for an hour until it was time for morning prayers. Then, following a light breakfast, he had received half-a-dozen local officials in the small room of his daughter's modest white village house in the old section of the mountain suburbs in north Teheran.

He had lived there since his heart attack in January, after which he had been advised to leave his own small house in the Holy City of Qum, some seventy miles to the south. Here he was happier, protected from the pressures of power by his immediate family, but free to continue his spartan lifestyle in the same way that he always had.

Slowly he had looked around and noted that there was not a foreign journalist amongst his visitors. In fact, there had not been for some weeks, except the Swiss reporter Blake. And now, he knew, that man would not be seen again here. His future was to be discussed that very afternoon. The

79-year-old Imam allowed himself a rare smile. Truth, as always, had found out the evil-doer. The snake in the nest had been removed, and would be destroyed.

He had found the meeting with the local officials tiring and had welcomed the noon prayers and the simple lunch that followed. It had included rice pudding, a dish to which he was particularly partial, and this had put him in a good mood. This was fortunate, because he knew the late afternoon meeting would make him weary and irritable.

The meal finished, he lay down on his blankets on the floor and began his afternoon nap. Deliberately he kept his mind free of all worries and refused to think about the decisions he would be asked to make when his ministers and Revolutionary Council members arrived later. For, despite his slow and serene manner, apparently untouched by the troubles of the human race, his heart attack had disturbed him deeply. He could not erase the memories of the uncertain fluttering deep within his chest during the two weeks of exhaustion before it struck. It still preyed on his mind. For the first time in his life, the implacable Gandhi-like leader of the Shi'ite Muslims had been frightened.

Hardly had it seemed that he had closed his eyes, than he was roused by his son Hamad.

Already he could hear the whispering of those gathered in the reception room. It was the loudest noise he had heard all day; there was not even a telephone in the house. But even the sound of voices ceased as the tall, stooping figure of Khomeini stepped with his usual slow deliberation into the room where four men waited. Nowadays, he did not normally see more than one visitor at a time. Today was an exception as a matter of state security was involved.

The five men seated themselves on scatter rugs on the plain blue carpet Khomeini had brought from his home in Qum. Tea was served to the men, two of whom were members of the mystical and all-powerful Revolutionary Council.

The odd man out was Colonel Najaf Murad of SAVAMA. He was invited to speak first. For a moment he waited, careful to choose his words so that they would offend no one.

Even he was aware of the precarious balance of power in the land, and the knife edge that was walked by everyone who aspired to the highest offices of state. It was quite literally a case of the higher one climbed, the farther there was to fall – and the more jealous people there were, all willing to give a helping push.

And the two other men in the room would have been happier than most to push anyone who got in their way. The squat Islamic judge, Ayatollah Sadeq Khalkali, who sat opposite like a sinister fat buddha, would have pushed anyone for the sheer pleasure it gave him. Which was the same reason he indulged occasionally in his unusual hobby of killing stray cats by crushing their heads in the nearest available door. Ayatollah Mohammed Beheshti, on the other hand, would get someone else to do the pushing.

Next to the Imam himself, the tall, imposing Beheshti was probably the most powerful man in Iran. Once one of his leader's most promising students in Qum, the cunning mullah had organised the Islamic Republican Party into the most powerful force in the land, evidence for which was its recent landslide victory at the first parliamentary elections since the departure of the Shah. Yet he took care to distance himself from the spotlight of politics, preferring to operate by manipulation and coercion of others, even – so his critics claimed – Khomeini himself. Whenever contentious and dangerous situations arose Beheshti would melt like a phantom into the background, steering events from a distance, away from the public gaze. Never, for instance, was he seen to be involved in the question of the American hostages, unlike the ill-fated new President Bani-Sadr and Sadegh Ghotbzadeh, the Foreign Minister. Instead he was working quietly behind the scenes to destroy them both. Bani-Sadr, because of his ever-increasing powerbase, and Ghotbzadeh, because his influence with Khomeini, were getting too strong for comfort.

Aware of this, Colonel Murad directed his gaze mostly towards the hook-nosed Beheshti, resplendent in his immaculate robes of fine imported cloth. "As directed by you, and with God's help, I have concluded the first part of my

investigations into the lawyer called Sabs Karemi. All findings have been detailed in my report."

He held up a blue cardboard folder, but Khomeini waved dismissively. Rarely did he read state papers, preferring to rely on his God-given gift of divine infallibility. "So the man is a spy." It was a statement, not a question.

"*Was* a spy, *Agha*," replied Colonel Murad. "A few days ago he took his own life in prison while in the custody of Khalkali."

For a second the fat smirk on the judge's face vanished.

"Then the truth speaks for itself. God has passed judgment," murmured the Imam. "This man tried to purge himself with his own blood, but he will only drown in it."

Khalkali's fat smirk returned. Confident now that he was not to be chastised, he said: "There are many more who will drown in their own blood, with a little help from me. What of his accomplices, Colonel? Did this blasphemous scum not have fellow traitors in the Mojahedin?"

Murad ignored the rhetoric and met Beheshti's penetrating stare. "The man indeed had contacts with the Mojahedin terrorists, but I do not believe he was a dedicated member."

"Do dog fleas mind which dog they are on?" Khomeini asked.

The colonel smiled courteously. "Indeed, not, *Agha*. But this man felt driven to work with them because he was disturbed by what he discovered while working with secret state documents."

"Huh!" Khalkali snorted. "He was influenced by the devil, and driven by personal greed."

"Of course," Murad replied. "I am sure you are right. And that is why he approached the journalist Blake to take sensitive information out of the country for publication in the West."

Beheshti leaned towards the Imam. "You see I was right to recommend we stamp out all Marxists and liberal trouble makers. Your 'Cultural Revolution' was another measure of your wisdom."

The Imam nodded; there was nothing to disagree with.

Murad was intrigued to see Beheshti at work, influencing

Khomeini, at first hand. It had been he who had suggested the purge of all those 'who chewed gum and corrupted children' two months earlier. The first result had been the vicious confrontation on the Teheran University campus between revolutionary guards and left-wing students, but the mullahs had continued on to purge anything and everything in Iran that deviated in the slightest from a strict interpretation of the Islamic code.

Beheshti turned suddenly on Murad. "And you also have this messenger of the devil? This viperous man called Blake who slid into our Imam's presence and would twist his words in articles in the foreign press?"

"We have him," the colonel replied. "And his accomplice. A woman photographer."

Khalkali sneered. "Then she must have the soles of her feet beaten to purge her soul!"

"Quite," Murad said impatiently. "Her punishment, and his, must be your decision, Judge Khalkali. I am just a humble policeman charged with the security of the Revolutionary Council itself. And I have my work cut out establishing exactly what information the traitor Sabs Karemi had discovered that could discredit us so as to make it worth him taking his own life."

"You mean you do not know?" Khalkali screamed his incredulity.

"I am finding out." The SAVAMA officer raised his hand to stop the verbal tirade. "You see we could not seize papers from the traitor, otherwise he would not lead us to other accomplices. As indeed he did: the Swiss journalist Blake. His colleagues had pointed a finger of suspicion, so we observed him. Day and night, including the night he took his papers to the journalist."

"So, what happened to them?" Beheshti demanded.

"I do not know . . . yet. Neither the traitor nor the journalist had them when arrested. My men searched the hotel where they had the rendezvous and found a few scraps of paper in some garbage bins. But most of the papers . . ." He raised his hands ". . . had gone!"

"The journalist must know," Beheshti said.

Murad shook his head. "He says he threw them out because he refused to comply with the traitor's request. He says he did not read them and doesn't know what happened to them either."

"Convenient," Beheshti breathed, stroking his beard thoughtfully.

"I shall make him talk!" Khalkali declared enthusiastically. "And if he doesn't, I shall tear his tongue out!"

"Not a practical suggestion if you want to learn something from a man," the colonel retorted.

Khalkali, however, seemed not to appreciate the patronising rebuke. "He will be made to appreciate the truth of Islam!"

Murad continued: "And while he is learning his lesson, my men will go over all the government papers on which Karemi was working to try and find out what he discovered. Meanwhile Blake should be kept in custody in case he was a willing accomplice with the traitor."

Beheshti recognised that Khomeini was getting tired and irritated with the subject. He turned quickly to Murad. "The Swiss Blake shall be held in Khalkali's custody while you gather evidence. But you *shall* find that evidence, is that understood?"

Murad understood. His neck was to be on the block if he failed.

"You are hereby charged by the Imam and the Revolutionary Council to bring evidence that is beyond dispute." He gave Murad a withering look. "If, that is, you are any good as our personal guardian of security."

"I shall report back to you with the results of my findings within four weeks," the colonel replied quietly. "I shall give you evidence of the information the traitor had unearthed, and proof of Blake's guilt or otherwise." He dared to look pointedly at Beheshti. "Whether or not you want it."

After the intense claustrophobic atmosphere of the inner power cell of the Islamic Revolution, Colonel Murad was pleased to step out into the waning afternoon sun, and back into the twentieth century. He watched as Judge Khalkali

was whisked away by his personal gang of bodyguards, and the elegant Beheshti climbed into the green Range Rover to be hidden from inquisitive eyes behind its sinister black-tinted windows.

Murad watched impassively as it drove away down the mountain road. The mullahs, he mused, through Beheshti's Islamic Republican Party, had the country buttoned up tight.

CHAPTER THREE

ENGLAND: 0935 hrs, Tuesday 19th August

"Honestly, darling, the whole family's been dying to know if you were one of them." Even at this time of the morning, Caroline Hawksby's voice had the vivacity of a vintage champagne.

The major took out his irritation at her family by stabbing a plump kidney on the crested bone-china plate. She held her coffee cup delicately in the fingers of both hands, her elbows on the table's edge, and peered at him from under a flap of wavy fair hair. "I do believe you're embarrassed by all this attention, Alan."

He pushed aside the plate and looked out across the cropped straight mower lines of the lawn. In winter, from the lodge where he sat, you could see Greshmile Manor itself. But in August it was hidden behind an ornate screen of chestnut trees on the ridge. It was all so green after Dhofar.

"I thought your family had lost interest in my Army career after I left the Cavalry."

Again the sparkling laugh. "Silly, they didn't realise what the Special Air Service was. Daddy thought it was something to do with Forces mail. It was only after that embassy siege business in London that everyone twigged what you did."

Hawksby lay back in his chair and thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his dressing gown. It was silk, monogrammed, and a present from Lady Greshmile. And he hated it. Hated it like he hated everything about Greshmile Manor, the lodge where he lived with their daughter, and their entire flippant and affectatious lifestyle, which was comprised mostly of gossiping, eating, drinking and shooting defence-

less wildfowl. Sometimes he wondered if it had been worth all that just to get Caroline.

The memories of last night, when he had come home unexpectedly on a snatched twenty-four hour pass, put it all into perspective. Caroline had been leaving for a hunt ball as he arrived. She had greeted him with a delight that was so overwhelming that it made him doubt if it was genuine. She laughingly ignored his plea to spend a quiet evening in and insisted that he went with her as she couldn't – nor did she seem to want to – let down her circle of aristocratic friends.

Hawksby found the evening insufferable and he purposefully avoided everyone to whom Caroline tried to introduce him. It never ceased to amaze him how she managed to know so many people on Christian name terms. Although he shared her blue-blooded background, his father had not inherited any vast estate and actually worked for a living in the Diplomatic Corps. After a patchy education by private tutors of questionable qualifications in most Middle East countries, including Iran, Hawksby had spent only three years in an institutionalised public school back in Britain. By then he was a fully-developed loner and outcast, and was never to be quite accepted into the social circle of society that awaited him. He had also found he couldn't accept them. And last night's hunt ball had served to remind him of it.

Caroline knew it too, and had done her best to make it up to him. When they returned after midnight to the lodge, she had disappeared while he poured himself a nightcap. Wondering where she was, he had sauntered into the bedroom. There he found her waiting for him, kneeling at the foot of the bed. She was stark naked except for a pair of silk apricot French knickers, which emphasised her buttocks as she leaned forward and beckoned him seductively.

Six months of deprivation had risen in a sudden surge of wanton energy, and he had taken her then and there, like an animal, over the edge of the bed. He hadn't even waited to remove his clothes, or hers.

The demure daughter of British aristocracy had squealed with delight.

Now, as he reached out and poured another coffee from the

silver pot, again he wondered, if he hadn't turned up unexpectedly, if some other young noble buck from the ball might not have enjoyed Caroline's own exotic brand of nightcap.

Hawksby said: "I told you, I can hardly have been involved at Princes Gate. I've been based in Oman since February."

His wife looked impish. "Oh, come on, Alan. From what I gather your chaps whizz all over the place at the drop of a hat. Daddy was telling me . . ."

"I thought you said he thinks the SAS is a parcel-delivery service?"

"Oh, that was before! He was really interested and got all the gen from some of his chums at the club. They said the major who led them answered your description."

Hawksby smiled and killed the coffee in one gulp. It was luke-warm. "You remember Jeremy? I introduced him to you at last year's regimental Christmas party. He's the one your father wants for his son-in-law."

Caroline remembered the dashing major. Although, at thirty-eight, he was the same age as Alan, he was more gregarious and out-going, with a devilish sense of humour. He'd been an instant hit with her, chatting enthusiastically about fishing, shooting, yachting and ski-ing. Immediately she knew her father would have thoroughly approved of him, and she was enjoying herself until his wife, Susan, joined them. Having already been told that she was a portrait artist who had painted many of the Royal Family, Caroline felt at a distinct disadvantage when the major's wife started asking questions. Like a naughty girl caught red-handed at a candy jar, she had quickly made her excuses and withdrawn.

"Don't be silly, Alan. Daddy wouldn't change you any more than I would."

"Of course not," Hawksby said without emotion. "Anyway the word is Jeremy's making colonel shortly. Taking command of the Hussars in Germany, later this year."

Caroline whistled gently. "That's some reward."

Hawksby smiled. "The country doesn't always forget its heroes."

She reached out and squeezed his hand. "Well, you're *my*

hero. Even if you do spend all your time running round the desert like some latter-day Lawrence of Arabia! Mummy wouldn't change you either. In fact when she realised you were back last night she told me she's planning a surprise party for you. Tonight at the Manor."

"Oh, my God! This isn't VE day."

She ran her hand over his beard. "But I'm sure she'd like it if you could shave this awful thing off . . ."

Hawksby removed her hand. "I'm afraid that's out of the question. Odd as it may sound, I've actually been ordered to keep it." Then he lied. "And I have to reach Hereford by this evening."

"Oh, no, Alan." Caroline's eyes widened. "Mummy will be shattered. You didn't mention it last night."

"You didn't ask."

"Alan." Reproaching.

"I'm sorry. Really."

Caroline shrugged, disappointed. Then she smiled sweetly. "Let's go back to bed. Just a quickie? Please?"

Hawksby looked at her for a long moment. There was humour in his fierce blue eyes. "How could I refuse?"

Obviously they weren't to enjoy the luxury of the new brick-built quarters. It was a disgruntled Sergeant Forbes who dumped his kitbag outside Hut 26 at Bradbury Lines barracks. The door to the black-painted wooden building, which had been specially allocated to the operation's snatch team, was open and 'Big Dave' strolled straight in.

Six men were standing around the old coke boiler that served as the focal point to the dormitory – a habit which had developed during cold winters, and stayed even during summer months when the fire was out. Like himself, they were all in short-sleeved order, the light khaki material emphasising the tanned faces and forearms.

Forbes recognised most of the men by sight, but only one by name. That was a senior corporal, Hamish McDermid, a lean hard-faced Scot who had shared many a leave with the sergeant in the desperate search for liquor and women

in some of the more remote outposts of the British Empire during their younger days. Now in their mid-thirties, they had both mellowed after long service with the regiment.

"Hallo, Scottie," Forbes said flatly. "You're the first bit of good news about this flap that's on. 'S'pose you *are* in, are you?"

McDermid smiled; a rare occurrence. "Y' ken as much as me, Davy. Two days ago I was having it off in a tent in the jebel wi' this Arab chieftain's daughter – a lovely little raver she was. Ach, and suddenly there's a priority message te get the next milk plane oot. Only just got in maself."

Forbes scowled across at a diminutive trooper from the East End of London he remembered from a pre-selection training cadre back in '76—Jim Perkis, more recently known as 'Worzel' or 'Nature Boy' for his newly-acquired interest in wildlife that had reached fanatical proportions.

The trooper, now a specialist driver mechanic, waved across to Forbes, who nodded back.

"I've been pulled back from a cushy number in Belize," Forbes complained to McDermid. "Training with Gurkhas and a bunch of Anglian recruits new to jungle warfare. Great fun."

The Scotsman nodded in solemn commiseration: the SAS always enjoyed their regular training exercises with the Gurkhas, the only other soldiers in the world they really considered to be their equals. "We've got a gherkin in this op, Davy, did y' ken?"

The sergeant peered over at the gathering of men. "Didn't see the little bugger. Why's he kneeling down?"

McDermid chuckled. "He's noot. They only groo 'em tha' size. He reckons it's 'cause his old dad only had one ball."

Forbes was feeling better; Scottie hadn't changed. "See you've been ordered to grow your whiskers, too," he observed, indicating the thick stubble on the corporal's chin.

"It's disgustin' eniť?" the Scotsman muttered. "If I'd wanted a full-set I'd 've joined the bleedin' Navy."

"Makes me itch just thinkin' about it," said Forbes, who normally sported only a drooping moustache. "I suppose

this is the bright idea of your bloody Squad commander? He is leading this mystery tour, isn't he?"

McDermid's eyes narrowed. "Don't knock the Hawk, Davy. Leastways till y' meet him. Wee bit eccentric. Likes te get the sand between his toes, if y' ken me meaning? And he's a tough bastard. But good."

From Scottie it was praise indeed, but Forbes wasn't convinced. "If you say so, Scottie. But I've managed to avoid serving in his Squadron so far, and I'm not too pleased at getting seconded to this little lot. I've always had my suspicions about officers with aspirations to be Montgomery or Napoleon. Or T. E. Lawrence."

At that moment four more soldiers trudged into the hut. Forbes recognised Captain Johnny Fraser, whom he'd worked with for a long time in Ulster, and the three other men from the Squadron's Boat Troop.

"Hi, lads!" Fraser called out cheerfully. "We hear there's a party on. Can anyone come?"

"Gordon Bennett," muttered someone. "It's Kermit and his frogs."

"Are you deliberately trying to rub our noses in the shit?" demanded the American.

Ian Ferguson, a slim middle-aged Englishman, wrinkled his waxed moustache. Before he could answer, the band struck up a lively rendering of 'Oklahoma' which drowned all conversation in the first three rows of deckchairs around the Regent's Park bandstand. He motioned to his opposite number in the US Central Intelligence Agency to move to a quieter spot.

As they picked their way through the untidy sprawl of sun-bathing office workers and tourists, Ferguson said: "Just in time, Josh. The attendant was coming for the seat tickets. Not worth it unless we stay to hear the whole repertoire."

Joshua Gibbons, a powerfully-built 55-year-old with grizzled hair and a stiff-backed bearing that gave away his West Point training, laughed gently. "C'mon, Ian, you British are always pleading poverty, yet your firm is virtually

answerable to no one. We blindly go on subsidising you, one way or another, just on your say-so that you're broke."

Ferguson stopped at the edge of the lake. "Since when is our word to be doubted?"

"On matters most secret," Gibbons replied, "or where money is concerned, always. And that's why I don't like the implications of your request."

Ferguson shrugged. "My request is simple enough. We'll need close-up satellite pictures of the terrain. You've got them, we haven't. We need them, you don't. It's what our masters are always trying to encourage. What they call two-way traffic."

The wrinkles deepened around the American's eyes as he looked out at the rowing boats on the lake. "You and I both know that there's only one possible reason why you would want such photographs. And you and I both know that there's no way the Administration is going to agree. They're trying to cool the situation over there. There's no chance of mounting another rescue bid, according to us and the Pentagon. So Carter's just goin' to have play it Khomeini's way. If no one rocks the boat we may still get 'em out." He turned back to the Deputy Head of SIS Middle East Section. "How the hell is it goin' to look if you limeys go charging in gung-ho and stir up the whole damn hornets' nest again?"

"Gung-ho is an American expression, Josh," Ferguson replied acidly. "It's not our way. Besides, we're only interested in one man, not fifty-two. It's a question of precision surgery, not full amputation. The patient won't even know it's happened."

"You bet?"

"I guarantee it."

"In writing?" the American snorted. "No, Ian, it's all too much of a risk. For our hostages and the current Administration – not to mention my career."

Ferguson turned angrily and stared back up the slope to the bandstand where the Parachute Regiment musicians were now beating out 'Oh, What a Beautiful Morning' to a soporific audience. "If you'd paid attention to my reports earlier, Josh, you might not be in this mess now. I hate to

remind you of this, but I personally nodded you the wink on several occasions what was going to happen in Iran. And you chose to ignore it."

"So your crystal-ball turned out to be clearer than ours," Gibbons retorted. He bit his tongue to prevent himself from saying more. He had known Ferguson for a long time and liked him a lot. But he was of the 'Old School', a long-serving Colonial Office man, who had resented the merger with the Foreign Office in the late 1960s. That resentment had festered to the extent of becoming virtually gangrenous when an abrasive, arrogant outsider had been brought in from the FO to be Head of Middle East Section. In recent years reports from the new man and Ian Ferguson were at such variance that the C.I.A thought they were just being given the spent ammunition from an internal feud.

Ferguson said: "Your people had their chance, Josh, and I remember we gave them every assistance, particularly using our influence in the Arab world to smooth the way. But you blew it. No disrespect, it was just one of those things. But you blew it. And now we need to do something for one of our poor buggers."

"Which one?"

"The journalist called Blake."

"What about Dr. Coleman and his wife. And the others?"

The Englishman shook his head. "They wouldn't thank us. No doubt they'll want to go back some time. Assuming, that is, they ever get out."

"Then you must want Blake pretty badly. Can I ask why?"

"The PM wants him out."

Gibbons laugh was harsh. "That doesn't constitute an answer, Ian."

"We think he's uncovered Khomeini's plans to spread the Islamic Revolution round the Gulf," Ferguson lied, "and that's very much our business and yours. The whole lot could come down like a pack of cards. That's as much as I can tell you."

For a moment, Joshua Gibbons watched the red-bereted trooper move amongst the sun-bathers selling the Parachute Regiment's LP of famous marches. "There's a consignment

of satellite pictures due over next week on Afghanistan. A misinterpretation of map-references could encompass Persia, I guess."

A ghost of a smile flickered on Ferguson's face. "It'll be appreciated."

Gibbons nodded. "In view of the reason behind the mission, I think it's justified. Well almost. But that's my personal assessment. Any co-operation from us is on a purely personal level and totally non-official. I'll deny everything."

"Don't we always?"

The two men laughed, then the Englishman said: "I know the Iranians got hold of a lot of details about your agents and safe-houses during your raid. But do you have anyone left who could assist? We've always thought of Iran as your patch, Josh, and we're a bit thin on the ground."

Gibbons' face set firmly. "What do you need?"

"I want to establish exactly where Blake is being held. And a contact for an escape-route if anything goes wrong."

"C'mon, Ian!"

Ferguson said mildly, "Methinks thou dost protest too much."

"You must have someone there yourself?" the American challenged.

"Not now," Ferguson lied. Sir Arthur had insisted that none of the Section's few remaining field-officers or paid help in the country should be put at risk in this particular 'sand bagging' operation. He could sense trouble and preferred to keep his powder dry; his people might be needed later.

"You drive a damn hard bargain, Ian. But I'll see what I can do. 'Though, understand, only if I can find an individual who will do it off his own bat. Nothing official."

The red-beret walked past them. As well as the Parachute Regiment's LP, he carried a few singles in a stark black-and-white cover.

"March of the Special Air Service," Ferguson explained. "The Paras recorded it for them."

"Don't they have their own goddamn band?"

Ferguson shook his head. "You can't shoot people with

trumpets. Besides, I told you, we British are hard up. Come on, it's hot. I'll buy you an ice cream."

"Big deal," said the American, and strode to catch up as Ferguson set off in the direction of the park cafeteria.

OSLO: 1512 hrs, Wednesday 20th August

At the editorial offices of *Idag-Imorgen*, the editor, Ove Gustavsen, stepped out of his glass-partitioned 'throne room' into the general office. He called over a pimply-faced, mousey-haired girl reporter who was the antithesis of the typical Scandinavian beauty beloved by the media. "Monika, have you heard anything from the Englishman Blake? I'm holding a slot for him on page two."

The girl looked up, dragging her eyes reluctantly away from the complex financial feature she was trying to sub-edit. "He has not phoned in yet, but he's sent a story."

"I thought he was flying out ten days ago?"

Monika shrugged. She didn't like the Englishman anyway, and she didn't care. "He must have changed his mind. Anyway, here's the MS."

Gustavsen took the manuscript back to his office and settled down to read it, noting that Blake had evidently bought himself a new typewriter.

He read it over three times, before finally sticking it on his spike in disgust.

There was nothing in it. It was wordy, rambling and, worse, two hundred words short. Blake must've been drunk when he wrote it.

Gustavsen opened the door again. "Monika, run me up a thousand words on Iran will you, child? Put together some extracts from Blake's previous pieces and find a new slant."

"Sure, Ove, why not," Monika replied and savagely put the blue pen through the best sentence in the article she was editing.

Hameda Gulistani wasn't hungry.

"I must go. I'll be late." She stood up, leaving the rest of her family sitting cross-legged around the plastic check cloth which had been spread over the faded arabesque carpet.

"Must you go in?" her mother asked. "It's your day off."

Hameda picked up her shoulder bag. "I know, but they have asked for extra help. There are so many people arrested nowadays, the prisons are bursting. Administration is months' behind and we're trying to catch up. I promised I'd go in."

She had worked as a secretary at the Ministry of Justice for the previous seven years. Her mother had given up hope that Hameda, at 26, would ever marry. However, her out-of-work teenage brother was more perceptive.

"More likely she's going to see her American boyfriend," Davoud said through a mouthful of yoghurt. Like most youths the world over, he enjoyed antagonising his elder sister.

"Do shut up, Davoud!" Hameda snapped, turning to glare at him with an angry toss of her wavy black hair. "And you've got food all over that moustache you're trying to grow!"

Not to be put down in front of the family he replied: "Everyone knows about your boyfriend. All my friends know, and the local guards. And everyone at the mosque. They *all* know you're flirting with an American."

Hameda diverted her eyes. "Everyone knows all the Americans have gone. He's French." She didn't look up. "Anyway he *isn't* my boyfriend. But he is charming and polite – which is something, Davoud, you will never be!"

"Now, now, my children," their mother chided.

"See, she even dresses like a damn Westerner," Davoud persisted, indicating the way her tight-fitting skirt clung to her fulsome hips. "You should wear a *chador*. It's good enough for your sister. The mullahs have said that women shouldn't dress to inflame men's passions!"

"I cover my head like we've been ordered," Hameda replied icily.

Davoud laughed. "Yes. In a Pierre Cardin scarf!"

Hameda turned on him. "Why don't you go and join the *Hezballahi* and jeer at people like me, if that's what you want!"

Her brother smarted. 'The Party of God' was a new militia of street louts who intimidated men wearing ties and women dressed in smart fashions – in fact, anyone who didn't conform to their narrow view of the Islamic code.

"I might just do that," he muttered darkly, as he watched his sister walk out in her high-heeled shoes.

Fifteen-year-old Shirin, who sat quietly in traditional dress, admired her sister's grace and wit and style. "You should respect your elders and betters," she said sharply.

Davoud just smouldered. Why did his family always side with his big sister? It was so unfair. It might even be anti-Revolutionary.

Outside, Hameda Gulistani suddenly felt as free as a bird as she scurried on her way to the Ministry, trying not to draw attention to herself.

It would not be easy to find the exact whereabouts of the Swiss reporter without raising the suspicions of her office colleagues. But if the Frenchman wanted to know badly enough, she reasoned, he might at last be willing to help her leave this damnable country that was being hauled, screaming, back into the fourth century. After all, she knew he had connections abroad.

And he had told her that he loved her.

For Jonathan Blake the waiting was the worst part.

From the first he had known he was receiving special treatment, because he had a cell to himself. It was an eight-foot concrete cube. Grey walls, grey floor, grey ceiling and a steel door. The chipped paint was grey. During the daylight hours the cell was lit from a small barred opening high on the wall that overlooked the courtyard. As there was

no furniture, just a rotten mattress, there was no way he could look out. But then he didn't really want to, because the sounds alone were nightmarish enough.

Five in the afternoon was usually the worst time, when Judge Khalkali himself would tour the cells of Ghasr like a fat, toad-like Angel of Death, selecting prisoners at random, and dispensing his evil justice by whim. "Your turn today, my friend!" "You've had it!" "Outside you go!" The chubby bearded face would often smile cheerily. But the eyes, those dark eyes, through the horn-rimmed spectacles, were expressionless and lack-lustre. It was really the eyes that told you that you were next to die.

Blake shivered. Sometimes, at no special part of the day, he would hear the screams of those being lashed or beaten. Sometimes the noise of the firing squads in the courtyard would go on for an hour. Ghasr Jail had only been designed to hold four hundred prisoners, so with nearly two thousand inmates and dozens arriving daily, the firing squad was the only way to solve the accommodation problem.

He pushed away the plastic bowl of thin cabbage soup, which he knew he wouldn't be able to keep down without gagging. Fear and concern over what had happened to Eva, who he hadn't seen since their arrest eleven days ago at the airport, gnawed at his gut. It wasn't helped by the all-pervading smell of confiscated whisky and vodka that wafted up from outside, where the revolutionary guards used it to flush away the stench of blood.

His bowels gurgled violently and he knew that today he would again be tortured by the diarrhoea he'd had ever since his first meal at the prison. Slowly he crawled across to the mattress, beat off the cockroaches and climbed on. The material was damp and mildewed, but he didn't care. Sleep pressed in around him with the promise of escape into the shallow unreality of disturbed dreams.

Although an hour had passed, it seemed only seconds before he heard the footsteps and banging on the cell doors outside. Blake's eyes were gluey as he forced them open. He knew it would be Khalkali's personal chauffeur who showed an evil delight in telling the inmates that the judge had

returned from his morning session at the newly-opened Iranian parliament, the Majlis. Somehow Blake had a premonition that today was his turn for a visit, and he was right.

His heart pounded as the bolts were slid back on the door. It was opened, he was sure, with deliberate slowness. Two revolutionary guards, Ali and Iraj, who had never been far away since the arrest, entered first. Blake suspected that it was their morbid interest in Eva that kept them around. That at least, he hoped, meant she was still alive.

The two men stepped aside, waving Blake back with their sub-machine guns, while a beaming Judge Khalkali entered, wearing forage cap and tunic that strained at the buttons around his belly.

He looked slowly around the cell and sniffed. The smile dropped like a stone. "It stinks in here. You don't appreciate what we do for you. In most cells there are six or eight men living. You see, we treat you well. Because you are a visitor to our country." The smile returned, and he kicked idly at the bowl of cabbage soup with his foot. "Still, you'll be going soon. Faster than you came." He laughed suddenly, forming the first two fingers of his right hand like a gun. "Bang, bang! You go, see, very quick from Iran."

Blake felt sick, but was determined not to let the man know he was scared witless. "I've done nothing, Judge. I just want to return home."

"Of course you do!" Khalkali chuckled. "But first you must confess. And then repent! You see we know what to do with spies!"

"For Christ's sake, I am *not* a spy!" Exasperated.

Again the smile dropped from Khalkali's face. "It is already decided that you are a spy. The only question that remains is whether you live or die. Do you want to die?"

"Of course not . . ." He bit his tongue, and restrained the overwhelming urge to spit in the man's eyes. "Judge, believe me. I want to live very much. I beg you for my life, and that of my associate, Miss Olsen."

The judge's face split into a wide grin. "That is good. Then you will sign this confession."

Blake ignored the paper that Ali suddenly waved under his

nose. "I haven't even had a trial, so how the hell can I sign a confession when I have done nothing?"

Khalkali sighed heavily. He looked bored. "Then you shall be executed. It is inevitable." He turned abruptly and walked out. The two revolutionary guards waved their weapons at him and, still grinning inanely, backed carefully through the door. It slammed shut with a decisive thud.

Blake's gastric juices gurgled audibly and he slunk back onto the mattress, clutching his stomach. Desperately he clenched his rectal muscles, but could do nothing to stop the vile wet patch spreading over his trousers.

One floor below Blake, in another identical grey concrete cell, Eva Olsen sat with her back against the wall, her long legs splayed out in front of her. Unlike the journalist, she had remained free from any stomach upset because she had made a point of eating only bread and ignoring all other concoctions of soup or stew that were thrust in on a plastic tray.

Even before the door of the prison had shut out the world, she was determined that she was going to get through the ordeal any way she knew how. With a more instinctive sense of survival than Blake, she had immediately discarded any pride or shame she felt. She smiled at the cell guards, talking to them in Farsi, and tried to keep them interested in her as a woman. This was particularly difficult as one of the first humiliations she had suffered on entering Ghasr was to have had her long, pale-blonde hair shorn with a pair of blunt scissors.

Steadfastly, Eva had refused to accept this insult to her femininity and overcame it by widening her eyes and forcing a sugar-sweet smile for the benefit of the men. She had, nevertheless, been careful not to be too brazen, in case she accidentally offended one who may have thought more of his God than his bodily lust. Besides, she had no desire to influence their black hearts and end up being raped by a gang of them. Instead, aware that there were frequently prying eyes at the spy hole, she would deliberately allow a bare

breast or glimpse of grubby pants to show through her tattered clothes when she moved.

This, she reasoned, might at least persuade her captors that it was in their own personal interest to keep her alive, and to use their probably slender influence to divert unwelcome interest elsewhere.

So far the ploy appeared to have worked. It had quickly become a sort of ritual and everyone seemed happy with it, so much so that she had even been brought tea, cigarettes, and other luxuries. A comb and mirror, a half-used tube of mascara and extra food rations, which were evidently from the guard's own plate and marginally more palatable than those served to the prisoners.

However, her questions about Jonathan Blake had not brought any response from her captors. They were evidently under the strictest orders to say nothing, or simply did not know. Eva had therefore assumed that it was most likely that he was dead, and tried to put all thoughts of him from her mind. He was gone and she had herself to think about. And inevitably that meant, eventually, getting out with the film.

That, in all fairness, had been Blake's idea. Suspecting that the little Iranian, Sabs Karemi, might have been followed, he had told her to take a photograph of each page of the document on her miniature Minox LX camera. They had gone into the windowless bathroom, so that there would be no tell-tale lights visible from outside. Then they had steadily clicked their way through the thirty pages. It was nerve-chewing work that seemed to go on for hours. In fact, it only took forty-five minutes before Blake had been able to ditch the document in the hotel rubbish tip.

Eva had snapped off the half-inch plastic spool cassette containing the exposed film and carefully concealed it in a sanitary towel which she then wore. As she was not due for a period she had nicked her finger with Blake's razor and spread the blood over the towel to add authenticity if she was searched.

She was. And it had all worked, although for one dreadful moment she thought the cackling women at the airport

wouldn't return it to her. Now she had the problem of keeping the cassette safe.

Temporarily she had resolved the problem by using a strip of used Sellotape from one of the guards' sandwich packs to hold it in place at the nape of her neck, hidden by the remaining tufts of her cropped hair.

Eventually, if she stuck to her story, she was convinced she would one day be put on a plane and sent packing. She had heard of foreign nationals being executed, but it was rare. Not rare enough, though, for Blake it seemed. Nevertheless, she would try to smuggle out the film and publicise the story in the same way that he had planned to grab the world's media headlines.

The door lurched open after a sudden clash of bolts. She looked up with a jolt at the shadowy figures in the darkened corridor. A scruffy guard, whom she did not recognise, stepped in waving an oil-smudged old machine-pistol. Eva climbed quickly and nervously to her feet and tried to disappear back into the concrete.

The man seemed angry, his eyes blazing. "You lie to us! You finished. You waste of time." His voice reached screaming pitch. "We KILL!"

She felt the spray of his words and the smell of his breath on her face as her eyes remained riveted on the large mouth with its discoloured teeth. It seemed enormous, big enough to swallow her whole.

The man twisted her right arm up behind her back and frogmarched her towards the door. A train of fluorescent tubes rushed along the endless corridor ceiling above her, bathing the long slabs of concrete in flat cold light. She was pushed roughly through the crush of people around the door. There seemed to be faces everywhere. White, blank faces under the stark light. Some she recognised, some she didn't. Some, including the guards she had got to know, seemed friendly now, even concerned. They were pushed aside.

"Please, you iss 'urting," she pleaded as unseen hands propelled her forward.

Blank grey doors flashed dizzily passed her on either side. Above, the continuous strip of light glared down like the

anaesthetised view from a hospital trolley. Doors clanked open and shut. More corridors, more lights, more blank faces. Then stairs. Down, down. More corridors, more doors.

Suddenly she was in the cool night air.

Half-a-dozen revolutionary guards dressed in ill-fitting uniforms stood in the centre of the courtyard, idly fingering their rifles. A young mullah in brown robes and a turban waved and shouted instructions.

Her eyes darted around the high walls of the enclosure. Her gaze looked past the hooded figure, who stood with head bowed before the line of guards, to the unmistakable squat shape of Judge Khalkali. His face was impassive and his eyes, enormous behind his spectacles, seemed unaware of the scene being played out before him like a sinister mime.

Again the unseen hands manhandled her across to the lone, bent figure awaiting execution.

Something about him seemed familiar . . . Then, just as she realised Blake was still alive, the sack went over her head and abruptly plunged the world into utter blackness. She tried to call out to him, but the jute fibres caught in her throat. She gagged.

She heard the distorted order in Farsi and the cocking of the rifles. It was all happening so fast that she couldn't believe it. Eva couldn't feel her legs on the ground beneath her feet. Their muscles had wasted away in an instant. She began to topple.

Her silent cry suddenly found her vocal chords as the order to fire was given, but it was drowned in her own scream.

The six rifles emptied with a clash that sounded like thunder in the enclosed walls, the noise reverberating in a whirling cacophony that numbed the senses and deafened the eardrums.

Eva's slender and defenceless body trembled as she waited for the lash of shells to tear her flesh apart.

Two floors above the courtyard Colonel Murad let the window blinds drop back into place. Slowly he turned into the spartan concrete office and studied the slow revolution of the ceiling fan. But his retina still retained the image of the two hooded, sobbing figures on the ground below. He had

seen enough mock executions to know they would both have soiled themselves. He also knew they wouldn't care. Their racing hearts would leave them in no doubt that they were still alive. That's all they would care about.

He reached into his jacket pocket, extracted a packet of forbidden Kent cigarettes and lit one of its contents with a monogrammed gold Dupont.

Perhaps now they would feel more like talking.

CHAPTER FOUR

HEREFORD: 1000 hrs, Saturday 23 August

"And that, gentlemen, is it in a nutshell. The job of this special team is to enter Iran, spring Blake from Ghasr Jail and make haste out of the country before the Ayatollah and his cronies know what's hit them . . ."

The Hawk's incisive tones seemed to hang suspended in the wooden rafters of Hut 26. Below, the eleven men of Operation Snapdragon sat on the two rows of chairs that had been turned to face the small wooden rostrum from which Major Alan Hawksby addressed them. Initial looks of surprise were gradually being replaced by faint smiles.

As usual, speculation had been rife as to the purpose of the hastily-assembled mission team. The choice of the Hawk was an obvious pointer to the Middle East, but no one had guessed its true purpose. Sergeant 'Big Dave' Forbes had got closest when, realising that both he and Hawksby spoke fluent Farsi, he had jokingly suggested they were being sent to bump off 'Crazy K and his mad mullahs'. Once the true nature of Snapdragon had been revealed, all the minor irritations and resentment felt by many at being pulled off current projects were evaporating fast.

With his baton Hawksby tapped the map of Iran pinned to the blackboard. "You can wipe those smiles off your faces, gentlemen. There's no room for complacency. You may think that a rag-tag bunch of religious guards will be no contest, but eighteen months ago Iran had one of the best-equipped armed forces in the Gulf and there's still a lot of expertise there, despite the purges. Luckily for us, the last one was only in July, as you may know. That means that morale amongst the professional forces must be at a pretty

low ebb." Hawksby tapped the map again. "But it's a bloody big country, roughly six times the size of the UK, and the population is decidedly hostile. The terrain is uncompromising and the roads we'll be using are primitive when they're not non-existent. Then we have the problem of getting into and, more importantly, out of Ghasr Jail.

"So it's not going to be easy and we can't afford mistakes. In fact, if we put a foot wrong the entire world will blow up in our faces and we'll set Anglo-American relations back to the time of the War of Independence." This brought a few smirks from the audience who, predictably, had not been impressed with the US rescue attempt earlier that year.

"And we're going to have no heroes on this jaunt. Any of you who think this is in any way going to be a repeat of the Pagoda team's public relations exercise at Princes Gate can think again. A lot of people have gone to a lot of trouble to keep Blake's detention out of the newspapers, in the interests of national security. So, even if all goes to plan, as far as the rest of the world's concerned, it never happened."

"There goes my chance on *This Is Your Life*," someone muttered.

Hawksby's eyes flashed to the man concerned, but he didn't allow himself to be distracted. "We have not been told why Blake is wanted and it is not necessary for us to know. In fact, in case of accidents, it's best that we're all kept in the dark. The PM wants him out, and that's good enough for us."

"Good ol' Boadicea!" Johnny Fraser murmured.

McDermid gave him an icy stare. He didn't share the captain's and the regiment's general enthusiasm for the lady.

"Any questions?" Hawksby snapped.

Forbes raised a hand. "When do we leave, boss?"

The major swung his leg over a chair saddle-style and sat facing the men with his arms folded across its wooden back. "Two weeks from today. We've only just had Ghasr confirmed as the target, but Planning had already made a start on the assumption that Teheran would be our destination. So we're well advanced. Unfortunately, as Iran isn't our usual sphere of operations, it's all taking a bit longer. We need

assistance from the Americans but it's had to be done through the back door, so to speak, and that takes extra time."

Hawksby sat up in the chair. "Now, although most of us know each other by sight, we haven't all worked together before. So let's introduce ourselves, reading from left to right, together with your special mission qualifications for the benefit of those who don't know you."

He inclined his head towards Scottie, who rose briefly from his seat. "Corporal Hamish McDermid."

"Mission qualifications?" someone asked.

McDermid scowled. "Glaswegian."

As the laughter subsided, the diminutive ex-Gurkha with the permanent broad grin stood up. "Jit Ratna. But you can call me 'Tiger'. Communications."

"Sit down, pussy cat!" one of the Boat Troop called out, provokingly.

On the rostrum, Hawksby's eyes shifted along the row to the next man, the cheerful-looking East Ender known to all as 'Nature Boy'.

"Trooper Jim Perkis. Driver." Another small man. Hawksby mused that the US Marines would probably have rejected half his crack force for being physically unsuitable for soldiering. But in the Special Air Service Regiment it was not appearances, but capability, endurance and experience that counted. Apart from being one of the regiment's top drivers, which meant that he could probably show the Monte Carlo Rally winners a thing or two, Perkis was a leading exponent of unarmed combat.

Next followed the two trained helicopter pilots on the team. Sergeant Dave Forbes, an SAS veteran who also spoke six languages fluently and three passably, and an Australian, Trooper Ian 'Kangers' Webster, who had originally joined the Australian SAS. He'd been flying since his early teens on his father's farm.

The serious, large Fijian, the second driving expert, stood up next. "Corporal Ramami Penaia." He was known amongst his closer colleagues as 'Pogo'. No one really knew why, it just sounded right.

A tall, slim trooper who had been seconded from D Squadron, which recruited exclusively from the Regiments of Guards, then raised his hand. "John Belcher. Trainee brain surgeon." In his late twenties, with hair cropped to disguise the fact that he was balding fast, 'The Butcher' was the team's bush doctor.

Finally Captain Johnny Fraser and his men from the Squadron's Boat Troop, which specialised in boat handling and general underwater operations, introduced themselves: Sergeant Turner, and two Corporals, Mark Benjamin and Bill Mather.

"You'll all get plenty of time to know each other better," the major said, "as between now and the mission start you're all in pre-op confinement.

"I'm dividing this small troop into three patrols. The patrols that will perpetrate the snatch will comprise Dave Forbes, who speaks Farsi like a native – so I'm told – and Kangers Webster. That gives us two chopper pilots. Then we'll have Tiger on the radio, along with myself. The theory is that, in case of trouble, Dave Forbes and I can talk our way out of it."

Hawksby paused briefly whilst the remaining eight men reconciled themselves to the fact that they would not have the dubious honour of penetrating the final bullseye of the target. There were some glum expressions.

As the chosen three in the audience nodded to each other with evident satisfaction, he continued: "Hamish McDermid will command the back-up patrol with our bush doctor, John Belcher, in case our hostage is in poor health. And, of course, our two drivers will have to find vehicles to spirit us away from the scene of our misdemeanour. If we manage to acquire helicopters, of course, this may not be necessary. It's early stages yet, so anything could happen."

Hawksby's keen gaze shifted to the four men from the Boat Troop. "Johnny Fraser's motley crew are here because we anticipate a wet entry for the rescue team, via the Caspian Sea." He rose from his chair and strode back to the blackboard. "For those of you who failed your GCE Geography, that's the big pond north of Teheran. And there's a damned

great mountain range in the way."

"Wee bit close te the Ruskies ennit, boss?" McDermid observed.

A glint of humour flickered in the major's eyes. "Yes, it is, and the RAF are a bit uppity about it. However, I think they see that it's the only practical solution to a fast penetration and retrieval.

"Anyway it'll be Johnny Fraser's team's responsibility to make their own way in and complete the reconnaissance. McDermid's patrol will provide the reserve in case we need to switch the teams around."

He moved slowly back to the chair and, raising his booted left foot, placed it on the seat.

Forbes watched with interest. He was an imposing bugger all right. Tall and distinguished. The way he let his head drop between his shoulders, and the distinctly crooked nose, gave him the menacing look of a bird of prey that had earned him his nickname.

Hawksby continued: "When we dismiss I want to see Captain Fraser, Sarn't Forbes and Corporal McDermid for a meeting with Planning. As soon as our plans are finalised we'll have another full briefing." He looked slowly around at the team. He knew that many of them would be weighing him up in the same way he was them. So far they seemed happy enough, but he wondered if they would be when he finished. They were now all waiting for how the preparation would affect each one of them individually. They would not, he was sure, be disappointed.

"Commencing at 0400 tomorrow we'll be leaving for the secure enclosure of Sennybridge Camp for personnel mission preparation. The usual stuff with weapons training and an unarmed combat brush-up course, and some fast cross-country night hacks to loosen up those slack leg muscles. We'll select equipment and stores and establish load dispersal. In the second week the chopper pilots will go to Middle Wallop for a crash refresher course and the Boat Troop patrol can polish up its procedures for a night sea drop with the RAF. The rest of us will move to Capel Curig battle camp in North Wales for mountain driving and general mission

manoeuvres. We'll then meet up for a full simulated exercise rehearsal involving all elements, including some Close Quarters Combat training on the mock-up that the engineers are starting to construct."

Hawksby took his foot off the chair. This bit, he knew, would not go down well. "From tomorrow morning, Sarn't Forbes and I will conduct our conversation only in Farsi. An expert from our Army Languages College at Beaconsfield will be visiting us and he'll attempt to teach the rest of you some basic phrases. The best one, I predict, will be: 'I am sorry I do not understand. I am deaf.'" This brought a low rumble of mirth from the team. "Planning has managed to collect a number of fairly recent travel books and tourist guides on Iran which will be circulated to you. I expect you to read them at every spare moment you have, so that you can get a good feel of the place. We are also trying to locate film footage from both the BBC and the private film libraries."

In the first row Forbes nodded to himself in silent approval. He was not afraid of hard work, especially on mission preparation, and appreciated the major's thorough approach. Perhaps, despite the rumours he had heard, the Hawk wouldn't be so bad a commander to serve after all.

His self-satisfied illusions were about to be thoroughly crushed.

"Now," Hawksby said, "I come to the question of personal preparedness. Before your medical this morning, I instructed the MO to give me a special report. This I have received and I am not at all pleased with what I find." He pulled a sheet of paper from his tunic pocket and studied it for a moment. "I expect my men not just to be fit, but to be the *fittest*" – he emphasised the final syllable with relish – "And that means able to run – not jog, *run* – five miles at the drop of a hat with a 30lb pack. And, as I don't want any of you dropping dead on me with coronaries, I expect to be able to pinch no more than half-an-inch spare midriff. That's a quarter inch out, and a quarter inch back – before you all start playing with yourselves." He looked around at the horrified gathering with a steady unsmiling gaze. "In other words, just about *fat free*! Men who've been serving with my

squadron in Oman know my feelings on the subject and, I'm pleased to say, they appear to be least at fault. Those of you who have been seconded in, however, will have your work cut out!"

"*Jesus!*" breathed Forbes. McDermid smirked mischievously.

Hawksby held up his hand. He was aware that telling a professional S.A.S soldier that he wasn't properly fit was the biggest insult you could pay him. Virtually everyone did regular running and weight-training of their own volition, because they couldn't stand the excruciating agonies of trying to get fit the regiment way from a position of anything less than top physical shape. "You all know your lives may depend on it. But more importantly, so might mine." Hawksby smiled to let them know it was a joke; but no one seemed to appreciate it.

The Hawk stood up and handed the sheet to Sergeant Forbes, who took it reluctantly. "You're a big boy, Forbes, so I'll put you in charge of getting everyone in tip-top condition by the off. After all, as you'll see from the list, you've got more to lose than most. John Belcher will keep an eye on you all to check you're all alive in two weeks time, and not just pretending."

As Hawksby stepped back onto the rostrum it was a deeply hurt Forbes who turned to McDermid. "What's up with the guy, Scottie? Just 'cause *he's* as skinny as a rake, why does he expect the rest of us to look like a platoon of sodding Twiggies?"

The corporal shrugged. "Dunno, laddie. Someone told me t'was because his ma didna breast feed him as a bairn."

"He had a mother?"

"That's all, gentlemen," the major concluded. "We'll all meet on the parade ground at 0400 hours tomorrow for a nice slow five mile run before breakfast . . . to break you all in gently."

Hawksby closed his file with a snap. The first briefing was over.

That afternoon found the major, Forbes, McDermid and Captain Fraser making a start on the serious business of the mission: preparation.

The Planners, a specialist team detached from the Intelligence Corps, an SIS Middle East expert and members of the SAS's own 'Kremlin' intelligence unit, were already well-established in the Snapdragon operations centre which had strictly limited key-holder access.

Overlapping large-scale relief maps covered the far wall to represent the whole of Iran. They showed every city, town and village, every main and secondary road and track, together with all telephone, pipeline and electricity pylon systems, and all landmarks visible from the air. Civil and military airfields were all clearly marked, together with radar stations and navigational beacons.

"Of course, we don't know how much of this is still in operation." The man who spoke with a distinctive Oxford accent was a slim, dapperly-dressed civilian in an expensive light-grey mohair suit. When he smiled, with even white teeth, his thin lips curled upwards in perfect line with his thin up-turned waxed moustache. His hair was thin and black, parted just to one side of centre. As he looked to be in his late forties, Sergeant Forbes guessed he'd been at the Grecian 2000. But the rest of him looked genuine enough, including the wrinkled laughing eyes, and the firm warm handshake.

"Ian Ferguson," Hawksby introduced the man to the SAS leaders.

The man smiled. "I'm the Deputy Head of the Section at SIS. I'm pleased to meet you all. I've worked a lot with Major Hawksby in Oman, so I'm sure we'll all get on well."

For a moment the soldiers watched as two members of the planning team practised their uncanny skill in identifying wild landscape photographs from tourist guides and travel brochures. Initially guided by the captions, they read maps as easily as most civilians understood a daily newspaper. Within seconds they would pin the photograph at the side on the wall, with a line running to an exact point on the map. Such ground views of the terrain, over which the team would travel, would play a vital part in orientation and familiarisa-

tion when they were dropped into a hostile, unknown landscape.

Forbes turned to Hawksby. "What's the plan for entry, boss?"

As the major explained, Forbes stroked his moustache thoughtfully. At the moment the plan sounded a bit bald, but he knew that at this stage it was only a composite of a number of contingency plans held in constant readiness. These were a mixture of actual operations and fully detailed exercise plans that were constantly updated and reviewed. This was the only way the SAS was able to respond instantly and effectively to any emergency. In fact, the sergeant recognised the first element of the plan. He had actually been part of the Sabre team that, two years earlier, had dropped into the Baltic, off the coast near Gdansk, as part of a mission to rescue an important Polish government official whose days as a British agent were more numbered than he knew.

Still, this time preparations would take considerably longer. Iran had never been seriously considered as a possible sphere of operations and so more research than normal would be needed and, presumably, some outside help.

Ferguson confirmed this. "We don't envisage you having to go anywhere near the Iranian military. In fact we'd like you to keep as far away from them as possible." The waxed moustache flicked upwards to emphasise the smile. "There are plenty of helicopters still in Iran. The trick is to find one that's serviceable. And there we have some information from our American friends."

"The same source tha's confirmed Ghasr as the target?" McDermid asked.

"Yes, one of their few remaining agents whose cover hasn't been blown. Secret papers were left behind when the Americans had that mishap in the desert. Safe-houses, agents, codes and escape routes, the lot. It's one of the main reasons they won't try again."

"I'm surprised they've co-operated at all." Captain Fraser's view echoed all their feelings.

A ghost of a smile passed over Ferguson's face. "It took a little arm-twisting, I admit."

Forbes shook his head. "The Yanks think it's too dodgy, yet we're willing to try it. For God's sake, don't we have anyone of our own? I'd feel happier."

Ferguson looked uncomfortable.

"My feeling exactly," Hawksby said crisply. He'd already decided that there was no point in going over old ground and creating ill-feeling. "But our friends in SIS insist that we have no one of our own who can assist, so that's an end to it."

McDermid instantly recognised the message behind the major's tone; he had served with the Hawk too long not to. The wiry Glaswegian glanced sideways at Dave Forbes. Evidently, too, the big bluff sergeant wasn't as dumb as he made out.

HEREFORD: 0009 hrs, Wednesday 27th August

Despite the team's misgivings at having to rely on a contact from an obviously reluctant CIA, the American's help was to prove its worth within the next few days.

The most significant event was the arrival of the photographs taken by one of the US geo-stationary satellites covering the region of Iran and Afghanistan. Due to their low orbit above the target zone, gravity soon dragged the satellites down into the atmosphere: their short life therefore made them expensive. But, at an operational height of only eighty miles, the clarity and definition of the pictures was superb. So good, in fact, that it was often possible to read the number on a car registration plate.

Hawksby pored over them late into the night. Alone in the operations room, he laboriously moved the wire legs of the Stereoscope along the overlapping nine-inch sheets that covered their anticipated lines of approach and escape from Teheran. Whenever additional detail was demanded three-foot enlargements would be ordered and run under special magnification stereos. Peering into the twin lenses he could see the bird's-eye view of fields, bleak mountains and remote villages thrown into startling three-dimensional relief by the device. Every road and track could be explored in safety to see what advantage it offered, or danger it concealed. Once

on the mission one wrong turning, judged from a map that was just a month out-of-date could prove disastrous: a bridge that couldn't take the weight of their vehicles; a recently resurfaced road that gave an unexpected bonus to pursuing enemy . . . Ah, debris from a landslide was blocking the hairpin mountain track completely.

Hawksby sat up and rubbed the back of his hand over his eyes. He glanced at his watch. Already it was an hour unto the new day and he was due to lead the cross-country run at 0400 hours. He plucked the red Chinagraph pencil from his breast pocket and carefully circled the position of the landslide on the clearfilm surface of the photograph.

Later, he would check this and other points against the JARIC analysis. At RAF Brampton, the Joint Air Reconnaissance Intelligence Centre also had copies of the film which they were putting under intense scrutiny, translating every blob and blur into pin-point fact. With unbelievable ease, developed from years of practice, they would correct lense-angle distortions and establish exact heights of landmarks and the size of buildings or natural features. They would identify a water tower here, a mosque there, a water well and an abandoned car, a lump of camel dung or a hole in the road. They were at this moment assessing each of Snapdragon's routes foot by foot, so that the entire team, but particularly the drivers, would know more about the terrain than the natives who lived there.

These finite and detailed analyses would then be taken over by a round-the-clock team of resident map-makers at Hereford provided by the Royal Engineers. Hawksby anticipated that the intricate map strips, which on the mission would be destroyed as each section was passed, would be ready by the end of the first week.

Shortly after, the model makers would reveal their awe-inspiring work in papier-mâché, plaster and flock: a complete, solid interpretation of the most intricate geographical aspects of the mission, including a cutaway model of Ghasr Jail, which would have to be memorised. A full-size version was already under construction, built like a film set to enable realistic assault training.

Hawksby finally lay back in his chair. He was mentally and physically drained. To go on now would be to invite mistakes. Others would check his work, as he would check theirs, but there was no point in provoking an error that might waste valuable time. There was precious little of it.

He stood up, stiff-legged, from the table. Tugging the short clay pipe from the deep pocket of the goatskin waistcoat he habitually wore over his drill shirt, he began filling the bowl with tobacco.

Eddies of blue smoke drifted over the pools of light that shone over the photographs and maps on the table. He only had to squint his eyes a fraction and he was there, seeing the two Pink Panther Land Rovers picking their way through the Iranian night on a boulder-strewn mountainside.

He killed the lights and took one last look into the darkened room. Inexplicably he thought of Caroline. For a moment he allowed his mind's eye to linger on the contours of her body. Funny, he mused, how always when he thought of her they were making love. Always.

"Just 'oo in the 'ell do you think you are?" bawled the NCO instructor. "Bloody Bodie and Doyle?"

The tall sandy-haired Kangers Webster, and Tiger Ratna stood back-to-back in the false corridor at the Close Quarter Battle (CQB) training centre and admired their handiwork.

They looked faintly ridiculous, the little Gurkha only half the size of the rangy Australian.

As the fog of gunsmoke subsided, the two cardboard cut-out figures that had sprung up in the open doorway, could be seen to have blackened 9 mm bullet holes in the target areas around the heart.

Kangers slipped the safety on the small Uzi sub-machine gun. "I call it bloody good shootin', Sarge. Looks like we got one each."

"And smoke very thick," Tiger piped in, his white teeth gleaming in the dirt-smudged face.

The instructor sighed. "Reckon you're a right couple of crack-shots, don't you, lads?"

Kangers grinned laconically. "Not bad."

"Then I hope t'God you two berks never have to rescue me." He tapped the full-size photographs of the faces stapled to the cut-outs. The first was one of an unshaven Iranian student taken from a press photograph; the other was of a bald man with a stubbly blond beard. "Because, my intrepid heroes, you have just shot the man you've come to rescue."

"Awe, c'mon," Webster said angrily. "Looks nothin' like him."

Tiger nodded, still grinning ferociously. "Kanger's right, Sarge. This guy's got no hair."

The instructor shook his head sadly. "We don't train 'em like we used to, do we? What the hell do you think Blake'll look like after a month in a Persian clink?" His eyes burned angrily. "They'll bleedin' shave 'is bonce and they ain't gonna 'and out razors to prisoners now, are they? Jesus, our photo retouchers 'ave got a better idea than you two cowboys!"

Kangers smacked his forehead hard with the palm of his hand. "Oh, bloody hell, I never thought of that."

For once Tiger's smile disappeared.

"C'mon," the instructor said patiently. "I think we'd better try again before we move on to live targets, don't you?"

Forbes read through the hastily-revised DIS document for the third time. He was not impressed.

The report had been prepared by the Defence Intelligence Staff in Whitehall, and comprised valuable but low-grade logistical, political and economic reports on the countries in which the British Armed Forces were expected to operate. It was compiled from information supplied by consulates, defence attaches and 'confidential' contributors. Much of it contained geographical and logistical information vital to the smooth running of an operation like Snapdragon.

Forbes tossed the stapled A4 folder aside. There were too many question-marks in this one. To start with, Iran wasn't reckoned to be within the British sphere of operations, the Americans always having had it well sewn up until recently. That meant the DIS info was only likely to be used for joint

exercise purposes. It evidently hadn't been up-dated for several years. But, more importantly, the writers obviously didn't have a clue about the current political, economic or military state of the country. The entire document was full of loose ends, cautious generalisations, and dotted with reservations about factual accuracy.

"So much inspired guesswork!" Forbes muttered aloud.

"That's wha' I thought, Davy." McDermid came noisily into the operations centre carrying a bundle of folders. "Te be perfectly honest wi' ye, Davy, I think this'll be more use te us."

The sergeant immediately recognised the highly-classified coloured files which indicated that they contained transcripts of intercepted radio traffic from the Government Communications Headquarters at Cheltenham.

That, at least, was the best news he had heard all day. Although he had soon forgotten his initial resentment about being pulled back from Belize, as the magnitude of Snapdragon became evident, the lack of solid information on Iran was beginning to depress him. He was convinced it was going to be the most exciting mission of his life; he was also starting to think that it might be his last.

The Scotsman grinned. "I also understand there's a special consignment of Iranian television video tapes on its way te us from the BBC Monitoring Service at Caversham." He was obviously delighted. "The Hawk's arranged for us te sit down tenight an' go through 'em all. Including some long monologues from ol' Crazy K himself. Sorta see inte the mind o' the enemy, so te speak."

Forbes groaned, then thought better of it. Almost anything was better than the usual long chat with Hawksby in Farsi.

"Did you know that when the praying mantis mates, the female bites the male's 'ead off?" Jim Perkis asked casually. "Apparently it really gets 'im going."

"Oh, give over, Perkis," Trooper John Belcher said through a mouthful of sandwich. "I'm in the middle of eating my lunch!"

"Sorry, Butcher," the little East Ender said, jumping down from the bonnet of the Land Rover where he'd sat to have a brew-up of tea. "You're a bit squeamish though, aren't you? For a bleedin' bush doctor, I mean. 'Wouldn't fancy you extractin' a bullet from my arse. I'd 'ave bloody gangrene by the time you came round."

Belcher, a one-time failed medical student, who was the son of a Harley Street gyny specialist, did not take kindly to any slight on his skills as an SAS medic. Although he had treated hundreds of gunshot and knife wounds, splinted legs in the middle of the Malayan jungle, amputated limbs and immunised entire villages in remoter regions of the earth, John Belcher had never quite got over his father's obvious disgust when he announced he was giving up his medical studies to join the Army. He had made the decision after a particularly bad day in St Thomas's when it dawned on him that he'd rather kill half his snivelling, self-centred patients than cure them. So he left the medical profession before he did.

When at twenty-six, he had been accepted into 22 Special Air Service Regiment, he was surprised but pleased to find they valued his past experience. Two years later he was a fully qualified unqualified 'Bush Doctor' who knew more about practical surgery, osteopathy and tropical diseases than the average doctor would learn in a lifetime. Nevertheless, despite his undoubted medical prowess, Belcher still smarted at his father's stubborn refusal to accept that he had achieved anything more than being the Army equivalent of a male nurse.

He finished his sandwich and delicately licked the remnants of fish paste from his fingers. "Any more cheek from you, Perkis, my son, and I promise you that if ever I have to operate on you, it'll be without the benefit of an anaesthetic. It pays you to select your enemies very carefully in our line," he added with good-humoured menace.

"The Butcher's right," Pogo added solemnly as he began his third Mars Bar -- a delicacy to which he was totally addicted. The serious big Fijian wasn't given to lightweight banter unless he could throw in some comment so deep and

profound that the conversation tended to grind to a confused halt. "I had this friend in D Squadron who had much dental work done and couldn't pay the man for the work. Dentist much annoyed. When my friend come back on leave he find that when his wife went to have teeth fixed, dentist drilled out all her gold fillings while she under the gas."

Belcher ran a hand over his patchy crop of thinning hair. "That's disgusting, Pogo old boy."

"Would never 'appen on the National 'Ealth," Perkis quipped.

"Anyway, what's all this about the sex life of the praying mantis?" Belcher demanded. "You've got sex on the brain, man. Remind me to give you a thorough examination when we get back to camp."

"With your cold 'ands? Not bleedin' likely," Perkis laughed.

Pogo's eyes were very dark and serious beneath the frizzy mop of black hair. "It is because his wife has little one on the way, Butcher. He cannot get any jiggy on his leave, so his mind always turn to erotic things."

"Like biting the heads off insects?" Belcher was appalled. "Is this true, my lad? Your missus has got one up the spout?"

Perkis beamed. "Yep. All me own work."

Belcher shook his head. "Disgraceful. You should never be allowed on a mission like this, not with a pregnant wife on your mind. You'll be a positive liability."

Pogo thought he was serious and tried desperately to find a profound statement. He couldn't think of one, so he said: "I think it is time we get on."

The other two nodded their agreement and made their way back to the second Land Rover, parked behind the first on the windswept sunny slopes of the Brecon Beacons. Butcher climbed into the navigator's seat and picked up the clipboard that listed the manoeuvres they still wanted to practise that afternoon. Tomorrow it would be a visit to the Metropolitan Police Driving School at Hendon to brush up on high-speed pursuit driving. Then back to Hereford to plan the load distribution of provisions and equipment for the two vehicles.

He glanced sideways at Perkis' cheerful face. He was like a peacock with two tails out in the countryside, Belcher mused. After a childhood and a mis-spent youth in the brick and concrete confines of East London, the sudden adaptation to virtually permanent life in the field with the regiment had come as a shock to his system. Others, less kindly, had said to his brain.

He had looked about him with child-like wonder at the activities of birds, insects and general wildlife. It was as though the emphasis of training on survival and living off the land had suddenly pulled this mysterious world into sharper focus. It had given him a hobby for the first time in his life. For two years he had spent all his spare cash on natural history books, reading avidly every night until, from knowing less about nature study than the average squaddie, he had become something of an expert.

His amazement and awe had been infectious as he passed on his tit-bits of 'useless information' to all and sundry. Everyone had been fascinated, particularly as they themselves were frequently in a unique position of closeness to nature. After all, they were always observing and stalking the most cunning and dangerous animal of all.

Although nowadays, a marriage and four years' service later, Perkis rarely gave his naturalist's anecdotes, the 'Nature Boy' label still stuck. No doubt it always would.

"When did you say she was going to drop it, Perkis?" Belcher asked.

The driver switched on the engine. "That's no way for a doctor to be talking."

"I'm not a proper doctor, Perkis," Belcher replied, and waved to Pogo to follow them. "That's the difference. I'm a pilgrim first and a medic second."

Nature Boy shifted the Land Rover into first and let out the clutch. "Janet's due in about three weeks."

"Shame."

"Why?"

"I was going to offer to deliver it for you."

"You *must* be joking!"

CHAPTER FIVE

TEHERAN: 1100 hrs, Thursday 4th September

Curt Swartz Jnr. was a worried man. And he had good reason to be.

Sitting at the long table in the Alborz Tea House, he had the distinct feeling that the eyes of every man in the place were on him. It was ridiculous, of course. But the very fact that he was experiencing a paranoia he had not known since his earliest days in the CIA compounded his growing feeling of anxiety.

Curt baby, he told himself, at fifty, you are getting too old for this game. They may reckon back at Langley, Virginia, that experience is everything, but in truth age is no substitute for youth when it comes to innocence abroad. He knew too much and had seen too much. He *knew* that, despite elaborate precautions, things could go wrong. He *knew* that, when the chips were down, you couldn't even trust your own boss. And he *knew* that lightning could, and often did, strike in the same place twice.

As far as he was concerned, lightning had already come too close for comfort, following the series of raids by SAVAMA after the attempted US rescue bid. Luckily it was not planned for him to have a role in events; as an exceedingly experienced field agent in Iran he had been held 'in reserve'. If things went wrong, it was his responsibility to build up a new network of pro-American agents from the swelling number of Iranians who were disillusioned with Khomeini's Revolution.

It had been a precaution that had been proved necessary, and so far he had been reasonably successful without arousing undue suspicion – as far as he knew.

At least, as a fluent French speaker, he had an excellent long-established cover as the Teheran agent of a French-based carpet importers, although the office in the Boulevard St Germain was little more than a dead-letter drop.

It was also an advantage that he could easily be mistaken for an Iranian. He had a slightly swarthy complexion and close-trimmed black beard, although it was somewhat at variance with the tufty, prematurely white hair on his head. Due largely to disciplines instilled during his service in the US Marines, he was always impeccably dressed. Recently he had tried to look less conspicuous by dressing casually, but even in sweater and slacks, he managed to look smarter than the average Persian.

He had been reading the *Teheran Times* for the past half-an-hour, but he realised that he had not taken any of it in. Hameda was late, and that was unusual for her. She had sounded anxious on the telephone when she had implored him to meet her, although she had given no reason for her request.

Then he spotted her amongst the stream of pedestrians on the other side of the road. Heads turned as Hameda clattered over the uneven pavement in her awkward high-heeled shoes and tight skirt. In one hand she clasped her shoulder bag and she used the other to hold the expensive headscarf that threatened to lift off in the breeze. Curt shook his head disapprovingly. Time and again he had tried to impress on her not to dress in such a Western fashion, but still she persisted. A trail of frosty glares followed her along the road. In fact, her determination to shed all vestiges of her Persian background and to leave the country seemed to grow every time she met him. He blamed himself for letting her fall in love with him.

Curt paid for his tea and, with a nod to let her know he had seen her, followed Hameda into some secluded public gardens nearby. He found her waiting on a bench.

Casually he sat down at the opposite end and, unfurling his newspaper, began to read it. Her eyes seemed even wider than usual; wide, dark and beautiful, but frightened, like the eyes of a small child. Her knees were clamped tightly

together, and both hands clutched tightly at the bag on her lap. Nervous. Distinctly nervous.

"Hallo, Hameda," he said, feeling absurdly like a ventriloquist as he spoke from the corner of his mouth. "What's the problem? Why did you need to see me so suddenly?"

"It's the Englishman. Blake." Her voice was faltering. "He has been moved. I only heard this morning."

Curt was disappointed. The failure of the US rescue mission had been bad enough, especially as it was now very unlikely that they'd try again. So the chance to help the British to hit back at the bastards ruling Iran was welcomed, even if he was going directly against official instructions from Washington. If this was starting to run into difficulties . . .

"When did this happen?"

"A couple of days ago."

"Do you know where he has been moved to?"

"Isfahan."

Curt thought for a moment. Isfahan was some two hundred miles to the south. Far away from the Turkish border. It was bound to mean a major change in any rescue attempt the British may be planning.

"Do you know where in Isfahan?"

"A house. It is specially fortified and will have its own force of revolutionary guards."

The American grimaced. In some respects it might be easier to penetrate a jail like Ghasr than a special detention centre guarded by fanatics.

"Do you know exactly where?"

Hameda shook her head. "No, but I shall try to find out tomorrow."

"Be careful. Don't put yourself in jeopardy."

She was puzzled. "Pardon?"

"At risk. Don't put yourself at risk."

"Curt?"

"Yes?"

"I am frightened, Curt. People in the office are starting to give me looks because of the questions I am always asking. And I have been told I must not stay late alone at the office."

Curt thought for a moment. "Then perhaps it is better that

I don't ask you to do any more. Anyhow, you've done enough."

For the first time she turned her head to look at him directly. "No, I want to help you."

She sounded alarmed and he knew why. While she was of use to him, she thought there was a chance he could spirit her away to the West. He had told her she was deluding herself, that this superiors would never allow such a move, but pathetically, her hope seemed to spring eternal.

He said harshly: "Your help isn't going to be much good if it gets us both arrested . . ."

Suddenly his voice faded.

He had been watching the group of youths at the other side of the vast lawn, since they had appeared from the trees a few minutes earlier. There were about ten of them; scruffy individuals, they gave the distinct impression they were looking for trouble as they slouched around, leering and calling out to people who walked by. Then one of them pointed straight to where he and Hameda sat and the group suddenly took on an air of purpose and menace.

"Time for you to go, Hameda," Curt said quickly, and began to curl his newspaper into a tight roll.

She looked up, seeing them for the first time. Instantly, the blood drained from her face. "It's my brother."

Curt was puzzled. If her brother was amongst them, then why did they look so distinctly hostile.

"Do you know his friends?"

Her voice was husky with fear. "I know Davoud's usual friends, and they aren't there. Those men are from the *Hezballahi*. The Party of God. There was a group of them at the house before I left. I was going to tell you . . ."

"Oh my God," Curt breathed. "Get up. For God's sake shift your goddamn ass and MOVE! Don't run, just walk quickly. I'll phone you at your office tomorrow."

"But . . ." she began.

"Don't argue!" he snapped. "Just shift it! Go!"

She glanced at him, her head shaking in uncertainty. Two large tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Hey, Western doll, come here!" came the taunt from one

of the approaching group. The words seemed to jolt Hameda into action. She took a deep breath, stood up and began walking away.

For a moment Curt followed the movement of her body in the thin material. She looked very composed, considering how terrified she must be. The girl's got guts, he thought, and felt a pang of pride in how she was coping with a world and home that had turned against her. He only wished he could believe that there would be some reward for the risks she was taking, but he knew there was none beyond the paltry retainer she was given. And while he needed her help, he couldn't bring himself to tell her that he was married.

"Hey, harlot, come back! Don't go! Let's talk!"

The excited voices were getting closer. Some of the youths broke into a run.

Curt Swartz Jnr. climbed to his feet, his newspaper clenched in his right hand, and began to saunter diagonally across the path of the approaching group so that he came between them and the retreating Hameda.

"That's him!" Curt guessed it was Davoud's voice.

"Hey, Frenchie! You come here. We teach you a lesson in Islam." The voice was high-pitched and excited, but Curt pretended not to hear. He strolled along, looking up at the ornate trees and breathing in the sweet air.

"Hey, Frenchie!"

The group was standing in his path. He stopped. Most had their eyes on him, although a couple were watching Hameda as she disappeared down the path. Some of them were grinning malevolently. Curt noticed that one youth held a length of metal piping behind his back.

Curt smiled, and wished them good morning politely. "*Subh-i shuma bikhair.*" Then he added: "Parlez-vous français?"

Some looked vague, but the ringleader, a tall, toothy individual with a bulbous nose nodded his head, meaning no.

"You speak English? *Inglizi midanid?*"

The ringleader sneered. "*Kami.*" A little.

Curt heard a rustling as the youth with the piping and two others worked their way round behind him.

The American still smiled broadly. "Good. Then perhaps you'll understand this . . . LEAVE ME THE FUCK ALONE!"

The tightly-rolled copy of the *Teheran Times* jabbed forward in Curt's fist, its rigid end hitting the ringleader so hard in the ribs that the cracking of bone was distinctly audible.

In one practised movement, the American pirouetted around, his right elbow bent. It met the face of the man immediately behind him, dislocating his jaw-bone. A lump of piping thudded onto the grass.

As he continued to spin, Curt opened out his arm, so that his fist, still balled around the newspaper, hit the third man square on the nose. It crunched up like a ripe tomato, spurting twin jets of blood from his nostrils. The other man behind him was startled, hesitating a vital second too long before lifting the knife in his hand. The rolled newspaper jabbed again, into his right eye, pushing it three inches back inside his skull.

There was a wailing like tormented souls as the four members of the *Hezballahi* writhed on the grass. Slowly, the group began backing away, clumsily falling over each others' feet, as they kept their eyes fixed on the panting American.

At last, Curt Swartz Jnr. straightened himself up, and tucked the bloodied newspaper under his arm.

"*Khoda hafez*," he said quietly. Good day. He continued towards the park exit gates at a leisurely pace. His stomach was turning somersaults. It had been at least five years since he had last raised a fist in anger and he had been pleased with his reflex reactions. He may be fifty, he told himself, but he had the physique of a man twenty years younger.

Perhaps Langley was right after all: there was no substitute for experience. He just prayed that, after the sudden burst of exertion, his heart wouldn't give out before he reached the park gates . . .

Hawksby watched as the men drew up the chairs in Hut 26 and positioned them in a rough semi-circle around the portable wooden rostrum. He was well pleased with what he saw.

Gone was the boisterous good humour of two weeks ago, replaced instead by a cheerful confidence and quiet anticipation of what lay ahead. Each man, he knew, would be alone with his thoughts: excited, concerned, engrossed, as a million and one items were ticked off on the mental check-list. And no amount of training would ever eliminate pre-op tension, even if it was just the irrational belief of the veteran that, one day, his luck would run out.

If there were such doubts in the minds of the gathered men, they remained well-hidden. The complex series of briefings and dry-run rehearsals over the past two weeks seemed to have served their purpose. Each man knew exactly what he had to do, and had had the opportunity to iron out problems to his satisfaction. Cementing the entire programme together, there had been the crash physical fitness course.

It had given everyone a physical target in addition to the mental ones set by mission preparation. It had ensured that everyone was too exhausted at night to lie awake fretting over the unknown weeks that stretched ahead. Most importantly, it had had the effect of squeezing out any dangerous feeling of complacency. Hawksby had deliberately kept all the physical targets slightly out of reach until, by a last super-human effort, they had been accomplished only the day previous to this final briefing. The first and biggest obstacle had been overcome right at the beginning when the men had discovered that the Hawk's idea of a daily five mile run with kit was not on roads or even track, but across rough country.

Hawksby smiled now as he recalled the looks of horror and anguish from men no longer used to being defeated by any man or natural barrier. For two weeks, the major had changed all that.

He looked round at the group as they settled down.

"Well, gentlemen," he began. "Just to put you all out of your misery, I can confirm that we leave at 0400 tomorrow morning for Turkey. By tomorrow night we shall – God and the RAF willing – be somewhere in Iran."

Mostly the faces remained impassive; there were just a couple of smiles. "When we've finished here, we'll drop into 'Q' who has a special treat for us in the shape of Iranian army uniforms. Oh, they're olive drab, for any of you who are fashion conscious. Like the Korean-made jackets so beloved by the dreaded Rev. Guards of Crazy K." He turned to the drivers. "Perkis and Pogo, I then want you to collect the two 'Rovers from the paint shop. They've been given the insignia of the 5th Iranian Infantry. Supervise their loading on the two trailers outside. I needn't remind you to make certain the tarpaulins are properly secured. I don't want a scare in tomorrow's papers with reports that the Iranians have invaded Hereford."

The laughs came a little too easily. Keyed-up. The atmosphere was charged with tension. Electric.

"Well, if there are no further questions, you'll be pleased to know that I'm putting the Mess back on limits for tonight. Don't overdo it. I want you to turn in for an early night."

At that moment the door of the hut opened abruptly. All heads turned to see the stocky figure of OC22 enter. He gestured quickly for the men to remain seated as he strode purposefully up to the rostrum. Beneath the fawn beret the florid face looked concerned.

He stepped onto the platform and spoke briefly to Hawksby, who had to stoop to catch the words of the shorter man. The major listened for a moment, a frown deepening across his forehead, then nodded.

The Old Man faced the men of Snapdragon. "I'm afraid I have some bad news for you all. The mission is to be postponed and revised for a new target destination. Our hostage has been moved to Isfahan. That, I'm sure you're aware, means that the plan as it stands just isn't on." He paused for a moment as the waves of disappointment ebbed over the two rows of seats. "We have also heard a whisper that a military coup is expected in Turkey. Therefore you

could find yourselves returning to a country in the throes of a revolution of its own. I'm sorry, gentlemen, but there it is."

The CO nodded to Hawksby and left the rostrum.

"In view of this," the major said, "I think it's best that you all take forty-eight hours' leave as from now, whilst Planning and I sort out what needs to be done. Forbes, McDermid and Fraser, I'm afraid I'll require you here to help work out revised operational details." His eyes took on a hard, glazed look. "I do not intend that this setback should delay us more than a week."

"I suppose," Forbes said to McDermid, "this'll mean continuing with the Hawk's bloody morning marathons."

The Scotsman grinned. "Certainly in y' case, Davy. You didna' reach y' target weight, did ye? When the major finds that out, he'll be takin' a very special interest in you."

Forbes shook his head in disgust.

TEHERAN: 1800 hrs, Friday 5th September

Colonel Najaf Murad replaced the receiver.

On the other end of the line the Director of SAVAMA had sounded distinctly harassed. He had questioned the colonel harshly and had only stopped short of direct criticism. That in itself was uncharacteristic of Hussein Fardoust who had served with him for years and knew of his unquestioned efficiency at first hand. Evidently someone, somewhere, was putting on the pressure. Someone who didn't understand that such investigations necessitated long, painstaking and routine enquiries.

Probably it was Beheshti demanding results. But it could equally well be that fat toad, Judge Khalkali.

Murad grimaced. Clearly the vicious mullah was anxious to use Blake and his girlfriend for a showpiece trial and execution. The American hostages had been carefully kept from his grasp, but evidently he had high hopes of using the plight of the journalist to boost his public popularity.

So he would not be pleased when he learned that Blake and Eva Olsen had been moved to Isfahan on Murad's personal

instruction. It had been the only way to ensure that the sadistic ayatollah didn't kill the prisoners out of sheer spite, boredom, or by accident. Even now the colonel awaited the inevitable furious 'phone call.

But Murad pushed the coming confrontation from his mind. He picked up the single sheet of paper from the green leather desk top. On it was written the word MULCRUF in capitals.

Turning the word over in his mind, he stood up and paced thoughtfully towards the window. Outside, the setting sun was casting the shadow of the Police Headquarters building into the grounds of the Archaeological Museum opposite.

Slowly he dipped into his pocket and brought out a packet of cigarettes. He shook one out of the wrapper and put it to his lips, unlit.

MULCRUF. A strange word. Perhaps it was a typing error?

In the four weeks since his investigation had begun, Murad's team of agents had been ploughing through the thousands of papers that the lawyer Sabs Karemi was believed to have worked on. Of course, it was impossible to tell if they were all there; in fact Murad had a distinct feeling that some might have been removed.

Only one item to date had raised any suspicion. It was an old report, dated 1978, from a SAVAK agent in Paris who had been keeping the home of the exiled Khomeini at Neauphle-le-Château under surveillance. Part of his brief had been to discover from whence the troublesome ayatollah was receiving support. The agent had intercepted some mail and discovered a payment cheque from the Mulcruf Foundation, a trust set up for the furtherance of Islamic studies and based in Geneva.

A red star had been marked in biro on the top right-hand corner by someone. Sabs Karemi? Or someone else?

By far the easiest course of action would, of course, have been for him to question the SAVAK agent who had filed the report. Unfortunately the man had backed the wrong side when Khomeini had made his triumphant return. By now the unfortunate's remains would be in an advanced state of

decomposition somewhere in the grounds of the Comité Prison.

He went back to his desk and picked up the handset of the telephone. Within a few minutes he was through to one of his subordinates. "I wish you to check out a charitable trust in Geneva called the Mulcruf Foundation. Treat it as urgent and report back to me as soon as possible."

He hung up and sat back in his chair, staring at the pile of folders stacked in his IN-tray. Every day the list of suspect anti-revolutionaries grew like a cancer. His special responsibility was to deal with suspects working within government offices.

Idly, he picked up the first dossier and glanced at the badly-typed label. *Hameda Gulistani. Secretary. Age 26. Ministry of Justice.*

Angrily he threw the file back into the tray. They would just have to wait. He would simply recirculate them around the Ministry's bureaucratic maze and wait for them to turn up again weeks later.

The telephone began to sing shrilly and he snatched it up.

There was no mistaking the angry rasp of Farsi on the other end.

"My dear Judge Khalkali," Murad began soothingly. "To what do I owe the unexpected pleasure . . ."

OMAN: 2330 hrs, Saturday 13th September

On the throbbing flight deck of the giant C130 Hercules transport aircraft, Squadron Leader Michael Fontenoy completed the last of his power checks.

Outside, the dark void of the tropical Omani night pressed in on them, relieved only by the distant lights of the control tower that dominated the secluded military area at the western end of Seeb International Airport.

Some ten feet below, four figures in dark fatigues stood at the edge of the runway, watching. The up-turned faces looked pale in the glow of the machine's landing lights, grim and disappointed.

Under the hastily-revised plan for Snapdragon, Captain Johnny Fraser and his three men from the Boat Troop had lost their starring role. They were relegated instead to running the mission's new operations nerve centre which had been set up within the regular SAS headquarters at Salalah. Only if things went desperately wrong were they committed to a night dash across the Persian Gulf in a fast patrol boat of the Sultan of Oman's Navy.

But that was only in the direst of emergencies, and Fraser's men were under no illusions that such an eventuality was remote. They were bitterly down-hearted, and no amount of nonchalant bravado and caustic comment could conceal it.

Fontenoy glanced at his co-pilot, a doughty Flight Lieutenant from Yorkshire, and grinned widely. He had spent twenty years in the Royal Air Force and never had he been on a mission quite like this. It was as though his entire career had been preparing him for the next twelve hours.

Yorky's returning glance was less enthusiastic; he was a practical man and uncomfortably aware of the responsibility that such an operation demanded of him.

"The rpms are still unstable on No. 3," he muttered. "Wavering, but I think it'll stay within limits."

Mildly irritated at his companion's attitude, Fontenoy said, "Ground crew checked it over, didn't they?"

"Aye, but that sort of problem isn't easy to locate out here."

Fontenoy jerked his thumb over his shoulder towards the freight bay. "You want me to tell *them* we can't go because of a problem on No. 3?"

Suddenly their covert call-sign came over the radio. "*Control to Alpha Zulu. One-Zero-Seven. Control to Alpha Zulu. One-Zero-Seven. You are cleared for take-off. Over.*" Control's voice in the earphones was very British; very correct.

Yorky thought for a moment, sniffed again, and said, "No, skipper. Them mad idiots'd fly themselves in I reckon. And probably drop us out over Teheran for good measure."

Fontenoy laughed and, the ice broken, so did Yorky.

"Good evening, Control. This is Alpha Zulu. Permission

to take off now? May I have some runway lights, please? Over."

"Roger, wilco, Alpha Zulu." The runway lights suddenly came on like three parallel lines of fireflies stretching out before them. "*Good luck. Over.*"

"Luck's nothing to do with it, Control," Fontenoy chuckled. "We'll be back before breakfast. Over."

"How do you like your eggs, Alpha Zulu?"

"Sunny side up, of course," the pilot replied.

"Cut it out!" A new stern voice came in. *"Please maintain proper radio procedure."*

"Sorry, Control. Alpha Zulu rolling. Out."

Fontenoy eased the row of power levers forward, gradually winding up the four huge Allison turbo props into their full combined eighteen thousand horsepower. The cockpit decking began to tremble under the strain as the engine pitch rose to a deafening crescendo. He exchanged glances with Yorky, who gave him a thumbs-up sign. Reaching forward, he released the brakes. Immediately, as the restrained force was unleashed, the unmarked Hercules began lumbering forwards. Once, twice, the aircraft jolted as the nosewheel tyres passed over the runway centreline. Then, as the momentum increased, the take-off run became faster, smoother. The engines screamed as the blades ripped into the torpid air and the runway lights began flashing past until they became one continuous blur of fiery ribbon.

"Vee One," Yorky reported. They'd reached decision speed. Now they were committed to take-off.

Fontenoy didn't have to check his instruments to know they'd hit 130 knots.

"Rotate." Yorky confirmed the safe flying speed.

The nose began to lift and Fontenoy eased the control column in towards his stomach and the aircraft's nose lifted as the broad-wing began to do its job. He felt a gentle thud as the front wheel left the tarmac; then a second as the low-slung main undercarriage followed.

The fat black belly skimmed low over the perimeter fence just as the undercarriage clunked up into the giant body.

"Gear up," Yorky verified.

Fontenoy grunted and eased the control column to port, gently dipping the giant bird on its wing as it turned, running parallel with the Sohar Road. As they straightened up he could just distinguish the landing lights on the strip. He settled down, clutching the controls loosely; they felt good in his hands. In a few seconds the shimmering Gulf would appear through the thin mist some hundred feet below them. They would remain at this height all the way into Iranian airspace. Beneath the all-seeing, ever-sweeping cone of the military long-range radars. Just above the wavetops. De-restricted wartime altitude flight.

Snapdragon was on its way.

CHAPTER SIX

ISFAHAN: 2330 hrs, Saturday 13th September

Jonathan Blake felt drowsy.

He had been sitting in the hard-backed chair for three hours and the cords that bound him cut so deeply that the blood no longer reached his arms. He resisted the prickly sensation behind his eyeballs and forced the lids up. The glare of the interrogation lamps seemed to bore into his retinas.

He looked around the room, trying to make out some recognisable shape beyond the bright lights. He knew Ali and Iraj were there somewhere, but still they didn't speak. Finally his patience ran out. "Why are we waiting?" he demanded. "What's it for?"

He heard one of the guards but he wasn't sure which. "You shut up. We ask questions, not you. Colonel Murad is coming to see you. He tell us to make you sit up and wait like obedient dog." He laughed maliciously.

Sweet Jesus! And to think that when they came for him and Eva at Ghasr, he had actually thought they were going to be released. Even when he was bundled – stark naked as a deterrent to an escape – into the prison van, and learned that he was being transferred to some mysterious destination, he was actually relieved at having escaped the unpredictable Judge Khalkali.

How stupid he was to have thought things would improve. Now, an even more intense interest was being taken in Eva Olsen and himself. Harassment and intimidation continued day and night.

He guessed that they were in Isfahan, although no one would confirm this to him. And the big fortified mansion was

typical of the riverside properties that had been confiscated since the Revolution. He had been kept in this cold, damp cellar and, although it must be well over a week, he had started to lose track of time. Days and nights all merged into one.

The only consolation was that he knew that Eva was still alive. Precious, wonderful Eva. They would never break her.

"Hallo, Jonathan." Murad's voice was as smooth as oil.

A shudder ran through Blake, developing into a physical tremor that he was unable to control.

Murad's hand, warm and dry, reached forward and rested on one of his shoulders. He could feel the heat of the palm on his cold skin. It was both comforting and sickening at the same time. He dropped his gaze, his head bent.

"Now, now, Jonathan," Murad's soothing tone continued. "That is no welcome for an old friend."

"You're no friend of mine," Blake rasped through clenched teeth.

"Oh, but I am, Jonathan. And the sooner you realise it, the better. Because I am the only one who can authorise your release. Indeed, I am the only one who *wants* to. If Khalkali had had his way, you'd have been dead by now. Only my actions have prevented it." The voice continued to drip like syrup. "So you see, to all intents and purposes, I am the only friend you have in the world."

Blake turned his eyes upward, just enough to see the lips moving around the perfectly formed teeth. He could smell the man's cologne. "Fuck off, Murad, you stink."

Murad didn't appear to hear him. "Jonathan, you told me that you never looked at the document Sabs Karemi handed you. I accept that. But you must have glanced at it, at least, in order to know that you wished to have nothing to do with it."

The journalist shook his head. "No, I didn't even glance at it."

Murad's eyes narrowed like a cat's. "Tell me what you know about the Mulcruf Foundation, Jonathan?"

For one vital, but fateful second Blake's eyes betrayed him, and that was all that the SAVAMA colonel needed. He had

spent too many years interrogating for the Shah's regime not to be able to read eyes like other men read books.

"Bring in the girl!" he snapped.

"For God's sake!" Blake protested. "It means nothing to me, nothing at all . . . believe ME!"

Murad rounded on him. "Tell me what I need to know, Jonathan, or shut up."

Blake's eyes began to burn with tears that wouldn't shed.

When the guards dragged in Eva Olsen, she didn't seem to have the strength to stand on her own. Still dazed and bewildered, she was hardly aware that she'd been violently woken from her sleep, before she was being strapped to the large wooden chair opposite Blake. The main interrogation light was swung round until she was full in its beam. The guards took no care for her modesty as her knees and ankles were tied to the chair legs. Then her wrists to the armrests. Murad noted with interest the way the light caught the perspiration that glistened, like a thin film of gelatine, between her breasts, where the ragged shirt had fallen open. He blew a steady stream of Kent tobacco smoke across the cellar. It burst silently against the damp stonework, disintegrating into a hundred writhing blue snakes.

He said: "Bring in the *Apolo*, quickly." Ali nodded quickly and left.

Murad watched the girl carefully. Getting her bearings, she was now glaring up at him with bright, hate-filled blue eyes from beneath the tufty mop of fair hair. Hard bitch, he thought. But beautiful, truly beautiful. They really should not have cut those flowing locks that way. He dropped his cigarette butt onto the floor and ground it out with his soft leather shoe.

No, that bitch would not break easily. Jonathan Blake would be the one to talk.

"Here, Colonel!"

Murad turned. Ali offered what looked like a bright red galvanised bucket.

The colonel shook his head. "Just hold it up for our two friends to see." The man obeyed.

"You have heard the famous story of *The Man in the Iron Mask?* Alexander Dumas, I believe."

"It's grotesque," mumbled Blake. The black eye-holes in the helmet seemed to be staring at him. How many poor souls had witnessed the depths of human depravity through its restricted apertures. He turned away, feeling the vomit rising.

"*Apolo* was invented by SAVAK," Murad said matter-of-factly, "but now it is used widely by the Imam's security forces. A simple device, but effective. It is just a hollow globe of steel." He nodded towards Eva. "Now just imagine the effect if we lock it onto your pretty accomplice's head . . ."

The girl's eyes widened.

"Of course," the colonel continued, "we could just hit the side of the mask with a hammer. It rings like a bell, you see . . . Can you imagine what it's like to be inside a bell when it rings . . ."

"You bastard!"

"But, no, instead we place electrodes on her body. You know, sensitive places. Usually the nipples, or inserted in the vagina . . ."

Eva began to shake her head like an automaton.

Something snapped inside Blake. "What the hell happened to God in your Revolution, Colonel? Or did you forget about Him in your rush to kill and torture innocent people!"

Ali and Iraj exchanged startled glances, but Murad just smiled gently. "We'll leave you and your girlfriend to worry about God, as she is deafened by her own screams. They will reach such a pitch of decibels, Jonathan, that she will probably have her hearing impaired for life. Can you imagine that? Deafening yourself. No, God will have his work cut out solving your problems without worrying about the way we conduct the Revolution."

Murad extended his hand. "Friendship, Jonathan, and freedom is what I offer? You will not be accepting it for yourself, but for Eva . . . Now, what about the Mulcruf Foundation?"

Blake began to sob.

At the precise moment that Colonel Murad stepped out of the riverside mansion in Isfahan, ready to begin his drive back to the capital, a black shadow passed over the Iranian coast some four hundred miles to the south.

Alpha Zulu's flight had been uneventful, the Hercules droning steadily westward across the starlit waters of the Gulf. At fifty feet it was as though you could reach down and pluck a handful of gems from its satin surface. But two hundred miles out from Saeb, the navigator had given a heading for the course alteration north. They had skirted the island of Sheykh Sho'eyb, just beyond the starboard horizon, and then passed over a remote stretch of coast virtually halfway between the two Iranian Navy bases: Bandar Abbas, two hundred miles to their right, and Bushehr, two hundred miles up the coast to the left, not far from where the blunt apex of the Gulf was joined by the Shatt Al-Arab waterway.

Idly, Squadron Leader Fontenoy wondered if the fleet of American helicopters and transports had also passed this way back in April. There was no way of knowing, but it was likely. He just hoped the Iranians, too, had a proverb about lightning and the same place. At least Snapdragon would not be breaking radio silence for some eavesdropping Israeli to pick up.

He pushed the hypothetical problems to the back of his mind; he had enough real ones to occupy him. "I wish to God we could go on to autopilot. This is bloody tiring." They were too low to benefit from that piece of modern technology.

Behind and below the raised cockpit, the eight-man team seated on one side of the cavernous cargo hold appeared unaware of the fliers' worries. They preferred to concentrate on what lay ahead at the target. Getting them there was the RAF's job.

"We're over the coast," Dave Forbes observed matter-of-factly.

Perkis, who was in the canvas seat next to him, looked surprised.

"How do you know, Dave? Like animal instinct, I suppose?"

"Animals have nothing to do with it, Perkis. The flying's gotten jerky. That means we've crossed the Gulf."

"'Ope it doesn't mean the Brylcreem boys is takin' a kip."

Forbes smiled to himself; that wouldn't surprise him. "It means, old son, we're into the Zagros Mountains. Crazy K, here we come."

He glanced down his shoulder at the small frame of his companion, who was forming steeples with his fingers. "Didn't know flying made you *that* nervous."

Perkis smiled uncertainly. "It don't, yer berk. No, Dave, I'm a bit worried 'bout Jannie to tell yer the truth."

"The missus?"

"Yeah. We got this little sprog on the way and, well, the 'ospital reckon there could be some complications. She's got this small pelvis apparently, which could mean she'll 'ave a caesar."

"Seizure?" It was difficult to hear above the roar of the engines. "Caesar, Dave. Short for caesarean. Touch of the ol' knifework."

Forbes nodded, trying to remember what his ex-wife had said about it. "Something about big tits, big pelvis, isn't it? Or is it feet?"

The trooper laughed this time. "Feet. Size of the feet can denote the size of the pelvis."

"What size feet has your missus got, then?"

"Size three."

The sergeant nodded sagely. "I can see why they're worried. Still, there's millions of kids born everyday whose mums have got problems. She'll be all right."

"I guess so."

They laped into silence, and Forbes' thoughts turned to Major Alan Hawksby. An unknown quantity. But what he did know he wasn't sure he liked. Except for the occasional lapse into dust-dry humour the officer remained aloof and unapproachable. Not the sort for Perkis to take his domestic worries to.

The sergeant didn't doubt the man's dedicated professionalism, but wondered if he wasn't too much of a loner for a regiment where an informal camaraderie traditionally ex-

isted between officers, NCOs and men. It wasn't unusual for officers to find it difficult to adjust to the SAS. Hawksby's full-time involvement had come late in life, but he'd previously been seconded in on several occasions for clandestine observations of Soviet reserve vehicle parks in southern Russia. As a Cavalry officer his knowledge of armoured vehicles had been first-rate. When he'd finally joined, his achievements had been nothing short of sparkling. But even now, coming to the end of his three-year tour, few had got close to him. Even Scottie, who had served in his squadron for a year, didn't know him. Oh, he knew his likes and dislikes, his whims and idiosyncracies. And he recognised his tactical military brilliance. But in 'The Family' you needed more than that.

No, Forbes reflected idly, you're a cold, condescending bastard, Major, with that cut-glass accent of yours. We may not be good enough for you, but you seem happy enough playing sandcastles with the Arabs. An odd fish all right.

He sucked on his moustache. Still, another few weeks and I'll be back in Belize. Out of sight and out of mind.

At the other end of the row of canvas seats Hawksby sat with arms folded and legs outstretched, the peak of the Iranian-style forage cap tipped over his eyes. To all intents and purposes he seemed asleep. Only the occasional puff from the bowl of the protruding clay pipe indicated he was very much awake. In the darkness he was absorbing the faintly oily smell of the aircraft and the steady vibrant rhythm of its engines. Becoming part of it. It helped him to accept the reality of it all; something he had often found hard to do on missions since he had joined the SAS three years earlier.

Suddenly, it was as though the weeks of planning had never really existed. Now he had started living through a chain of predestined events; the result of meticulous research, analysis and informal speculation, that had been conceived in the minds of a handful of men in an isolated camp thousands of miles away. Sustained by endless cigarettes, coffee and their over-active imaginations, they had determined each minute step of the operation to come.

He and his team would be walking through the scenario created in the pages of that report. It was uncanny and unnerving, and it was why he had to pinch himself mentally to be sure he was really here – living out the Planners' thoughts – and not just dreaming.

He opened his eyes and tilted back the peak of his cap. In the dim red glow of the interior lights the two long wheel-based Land Rovers, with their bizarre desert camouflage, were real enough. They sat firmly secured onto their parachute pallets, like two trapped noble beasts eager to be free. As much a friend as the horse to the cowboy, the 'Pink Panthers' were very special fighting machines. With their reinforced chassis, 16 inch sand tyres and monstrous supercharged V8 engines, they would be the team's home for as long as the mission lasted. Aboard was everything they would need in the coming days: doss bags strapped to the vehicles' side-bins which carried tools, ammunition and equipment; jerry cans of fuel and water; provisions, personal kit, communications equipment – and a veritable arsenal of weaponry, not least the menacing L37 'jimpy' general purpose machine guns which were mounted on the vehicles, capable of tackling even low-flying aircraft, or light armoured vehicles.

The kit, Hawksby reflected, was probably the best in the world. The best even before the SAS engineer detachment began its own modifications.

He glanced sideways along the row of men. They too, he was satisfied, were second to none. McDermid he knew well: as tough as they come, but a fast thinker too, especially in a tight corner. 'Tiger' Ratna was an ex-Gurkha. Enough said, except that the tiny man from Nepal had served with him for a year in Oman and had a genius for coping with the communications problems caused by the crazy atmospherics experienced in the mountains and deserts. Iran had both. 'Nature Boy' Perkis, the Cockney wildlife freak, also happened to be the second best driver in the regiment; 'Pogo' was the first – and was one of a long line of Fijian SAS recruits.

Next to Hawksby sat the bush doctor, John Belcher, scribbling thoughtfully in a small red notebook. Dedicated,

with an insatiable thirst for medical knowledge and practical experience of every emergency he might ever be called on to contend with – as well as many he certainly wouldn't. Belcher also knew how to kill a man with one hand, and in fact, had. Twice.

That leaves Dave Forbes, thought Hawksby. A bit of an unknown quantity to me. Plenty of form though, and a pretty chequered history. A bit of a mascot in 'The Family', he was just coming to the end of his third tour of duty, which would be his first break since the unhappy year he spent desk-bound with an Intelligence Corps unit in 1977. Afterwards he had been offered the chance of 'a crown' up, but turned down the rank of Staff Sergeant in favour of remaining 'up the sharp-end'.

22 Special Air Service Regiment had cultivated a special 'rotation' system to avoid unnecessary wastage of skills that were expensive to acquire in terms of time and money. It was long proven that you couldn't keep a man in top fighting trim for longer than three years without his cutting edge becoming dulled. So the regiment would normally second him to another, less arduous, and totally different task for a year. Preferably he would acquire a new special skill or knowledge that would be useful when he returned. After his relaxing break, the soldier would come back refreshed and begin re-training back to his old peak.

Big Dave Forbes was one of those who couldn't keep away. He craved action like other men craved drink or women. Hawksby frowned. In fact, according to his record, the sergeant was pretty fond of both of those too!

On past occasions he had got pretty close to being RTU'd but, because of his exemplary combat record and glowing testimonials from his squadron commanders, he had escaped the SAS man's most feared punishment: to be Returned To Unit. An ordinary squaddie again.

Hawksby tapped out his pipe. You certainly couldn't describe Forbes as ordinary. Despite the caricature image of the oafish NCO he had cultivated, it was just a veneer to cover a sensitive soul. Or so he had been told. Certainly it managed to conceal successfully his obvious intelligence and

brainpower. He was accomplished in languages, explosives and demolition, communications, and a qualified helicopter pilot into the bargain.

It was for that vast experience that Hawksby had wanted him. But, as a soldier in his team, he still wasn't sure. He had found the 35-year-old sergeant fit enough, but overweight and resentful of authority. Perhaps it was just *his* authority that rankled. Just an unfortunate chemistry clash. On the other hand, Forbes, perhaps you've finally burnt yourself out? You may be as good as they say you are, sergeant, but I'm not so sure. I'll be watching you carefully. Very carefully.

The rest of Alpha Zulu's run-in went like clockwork. There was just one fleeting moment of panic when the aircraft's specially-fitted radar warning receiver identified an airborne Iranian radar attempting to 'interrogate' them. But the signal disappeared as quickly as it came, losing the bulky aircraft in the 'ground clutter' thrown up by the hilly terrain.

Squadron Leader Fontenoy relaxed again as Alpha Zulu droned doggedly on to the designated drop-zone some ninety miles south-south-west of Isfahan. The DZ had not been selected for the pilot's benefit; far from it. It was no more than a remote three-mile-long triangular break in the Zagros Mountains range, on the edge of the salt lakes of the Qashquai. Offering a gentle incline into the surrounding crags, through which ran one of the main tributaries to the Khersan River, it allowed Fontenoy's crew under two miles of level flight to set up for the jump. One second's miscalculation and Alpha Zulu would find itself face-to-face with a steeply rising 10,000 peak.

Fontenoy wiped the sweat off his palm onto the leg of his flying-suit. "Okay, Yorky, we're approaching the target area now. Tell the dispatchers to stand by. Time to run about ten minutes, now."

The call to action stations over the intercom signalled a sudden rush of activity. The air dispatchers began unshackling the Panthers' drop pallets. Strapping on their jump helmets, Hawksby's group gathered at the front of the bay

beneath the flight deck. Without a word they went through the routine of checking each others' parachutes and ensuring that all their personal kit was securely fastened.

They all felt the aircraft begin to lift as it rose from 100 feet to clear the range of hills blocking their approach to the desolate triangle that formed their DZ.

Nearest to a portside window, at the front of the freight bay, Forbes peered out at the vague bulk of boulder-strewn hillside flashing past beneath them. It was faintly illuminated by a liberal sprinkling of stars in the black domed void.

"Hope that the pilot knows where he is!" he shouted above the noise of the engines. "All looks the bloody same to me! Not a light anywhere!"

He had forgotten Hawksby was behind him, and was almost surprised not to get a curt reply. "Probably still over the Gulf, Dave! Sure you can see land?"

Forbes gave a thumbs-up. "It's scraping the bottom of the plane! Is this a request stop?"

Hawksby's teeth glistened in the red light, as he grinned and leaned over the other's shoulder. The aircraft began to descend the far side of the range as the hills started flattening towards the tributary river bed. "See those black holes, Dave?"

"Huh?"

"Down the side of the mountain!"

Forbes squinted into the hazy light. It wasn't easy to see as the terrain was dropping away fast beneath them. Then he saw them, like a long line of molehills, each some four feet across, strung in a straight row at regular intervals down the slope.

"They're the irrigation *qanats*!"

"Look more like bleedin' great shell holes!" He nodded with approval. Back at Hereford he had been greatly impressed by the ancient Persians' traditional method of bringing fertility to their acrid land. A long series of vertical tunnels, sometimes 300 feet deep, were sunk into the lower hill slope, all converging with a main horizontal channel at the base. It served to carry the water, collected from condensation high in the mountains, to the villages in the

valleys. Sometimes a *qanat* would run underground for as far as twenty-five miles, its course marked by the endless series of vertical shafts which had been used by the builders to extract the earth by hand during construction. It had been the one redeeming feature about Iran, decided Forbes. It took some guts and a lot of work for the peasants to dig through twenty-five miles of long passages just four feet in diameter, armed with a shovel and a goatskin excavation bucket.

The aircraft levelled out bumpily as it hit the 800 foot spot on the radio-altimeter. A slight crosswind buffeted the huge bulk as the pilot fought to hold a steady course. The giant ramp doors gradually opened under the tailplane like a great jaw.

There followed a few seconds of chaos at the sudden inrush of air. Dust, rubbish and loose rigging whirled crazily in the sudden maelstrom. As it subsided the inside of the aircraft became icy cold, as it filled with crystalline mountain air.

The red light blinked on, followed seconds later by the green.

As the pilot released the extraction chute, everyone watched with bated breath as the 100-foot line tugged at the first Panther pallet. It began accelerating fast over the deck rollers towards the yawning tail ramp.

"Load moving," the dispatcher reported solemnly into his intercom.

Gathering momentum, the first pallet rattled out into the night to the brisk snap of parachutes opening into the slipstream.

Above, on the flight-deck, Fontenoy grimaced as he held Alpha Zulu's speed steady at 115 knots. Seriously late in establishing a steady approach run across the triangular DZ, the Hercules had already gobbled up seven hundred metres of the precious thousand that remained.

The second pallet followed, immediately gliding across the spinning metal cylinders, over the ramp, and disappeared.

"Load gone." The dispatcher listened intently on his earphones to the instructions from the cockpit. Concern

clouded his pale face. Hawksby met his gaze. 'WE'RE RUNNING OUT OF DZ, MAJOR! GO!"

Major Hawksby beckoned his men. "OKAY, LET'S GO!"

Grins broke through amid the line of blackened faces as they began their rush down towards the ramp and hurled themselves unhesitatingly out into the night sky.

Someone screamed: "GERONIMO . . .!" at the top of his voice, but the war cry was cut off abruptly by the slipstream.

Fontenoy died for the sixteenth time in as many seconds. Beside him, Yorky leaned forward, peering out through the screen as though he would see better if his eyes were watering with strain.

"We won't do it," he said stiffly.

Fontenoy blanched. There was no mistaking the solid black wall of mountain hurtling towards them. He was mesmerised. *Come on*!

"Stick gone!" At last the dispatcher's voice broke into Fontenoy's headset.

"Thank Christ!" He hauled the control-column towards him and palmed the power levers forward. On the radio-altimeter the needle had started registering the rapidly-rising ground. The protesting engines screamed like banshees and the deck canted violently as the nose of the C130 was dragged upward. The mountain filled the windscreen, blotting out the sky.

In the cargo hold the dispatchers grabbed for handholds as Alpha Zulu suddenly found its strength and began to surge upwards, reaching desperately for the stars. Just before the rear ramp closed, they caught a clear glimpse of the DZ triangle behind and below them. In the starlight it was just possible to distinguish the dark shapes of bobbing aerofoil parachutes strung out into the distance.

Yorky sat frozen and speechless as the mountain peak glistened a mere twenty-five feet below them. As the fear ebbed out of him, he felt a rush of pride. They had done it. Beside him Fontenoy sat nonchalantly. There was a smug, fat grin on his face.

The roar of Alpha Zulu's engines faded and the intense quietness of the Iranian night enveloped Hawksby as he swung gently earthwards. The only sound was a gentle singing of the wind in the canopy shrouds above his head.

Belcher, who had jumped with him, was veering to the north in one of the unpredictable mountain air currents, but was still in sight. The night was too dark to see anyone else, although vision would improve as their eyes became accustomed. Already he was just able to distinguish the ragged rim of the mountains against the ultramarine sky. He peered below for the earth that would suddenly swell up to meet him. There was no tell-tale sign of a tree or rocky outcrop that could so easily mean a fractured limb, or worse. Then he was there, the hard crust of barren soil just feet below him. He braced himself, bending his knees. It was such a clean landing that he surprised himself. Scarcely had his boots hit the ground, than he twisted the release ring at his stomach and stepped out of the harness. Swiftly he ran back round the fallen canopy in order to deflate it.

Then, in one practised movement he unslung the Uzi sub-machine gun and dropped to one knee. He squinted his eyes, trying hard to penetrate the utter blackness. Slowly he scanned the southern slope of the triangle where it dipped towards the valley. There came a soft crunch somewhere to his left. Fifty yards away John Belcher had made an untidy landing. He could hear the scraping as the man's boots were dragged across the shale for several feet before the canopy collapsed and the harness could be released.

Hawksby scanned again. His shoulders dropped slightly as he relaxed. So far, so good.

Within sixty seconds Belcher had retrieved and bundled the billowing black parachute silk. He then stood guard while Hawksby wrapped up his.

Suddenly Forbes came limping out of the darkness.

"You okay, Dave?" Belcher asked.

The sergeant grimaced. "Sprained my bloody ankle, that's all.'

Hawksby grunted. "Good job you lost that weight then. Otherwise you might have broken it."

Forbes glared.

"Never mind," Belcher interrupted quickly. "I have the technology to rebuild you."

The tension melted. Forbes elbowed him affably. "Piss off, Kildare."

They continued down the slope until they located the Panthers. The Fijian Pogo was already there and had started to drive one of them off the buckled pallet, the force-absorbing honeycomb platform having kept the vehicle intact.

Other members emerged from the towering shadow of the Zagros peaks.

Jim Perkis looked white. "I reckon this was a bleedin' close shave. I landed on a soddin' one-in-two slope."

"Get the 'chutes and pallets hidden," Hawksby ordered briskly. "We can stow them in those bushes."

"Quiet!" Tiger called suddenly.

He dropped to one knee, flicking the safety catch off his Uzi. Gently, everyone turned in the direction in which the little Gurkha was staring.

"What is it?" Perkis whispered.

"A noise," Tiger replied quietly. "Metallic. There it is again."

"Where?"

"Shut up!" Hawksby hissed.

There was a sudden movement in the gloom. Cocking handles rasped as eight Uzis with 280 9 mm rounds zeroed in on the shape growing out of the shadows.

Perkis' eyes widened. "It's a bleedin' sheep!"

Eight Uzis lowered as one.

"Before y' utter a word, laddie," McDermid said, "we dunna *care* what breed the little sod is."

"This place gives creepers-jeepers," Pogo Penaia said emphatically.

Hawksby shouldered his Uzi. "A sheep with a bell could mean a shepherd nearby. So let's get weaving."

Panther One careered around the outcrop in a four-wheeled drift. Perkis changed down for a better grip and let out the

clutch. The heavy-duty tyres smoked and spewed pebbles as the treads bit deep and thrust them forward into the darkened landscape.

Beside the driver, Forbes felt bilious. It was no fun playing passenger on a night drive with invisible infra-red headlights, being hurtled blindly across country through the early hours of the morning.

"Steady on, Perkis. This isn't the M1."

He could see the driver's fixed grin beneath the khaki metal Common User Binocular frames. The CUBs were infra-red sensitive with their own power pack, which gave Perkis a distinct advantage over Forbes as he could clearly see the IR headlamp beams that prodded through the maze of rocks like illuminating fingers. The system was good but a bit out-moded. Nevertheless, on a 'deniable' mission, more modern identifiable night sights had been rejected.

"I know where we're goin'," Perkis reassured.

"I've only got your word for that. Bloody hell, we've only got to cover thirty-five miles before dawn."

"Yeah, but you're navigating Sarge."

"Charming!"

Forbes glanced down at the canvas case with the perspex face that held the detailed route maps prepared by JARIC. To the glow of a map-light he marked off the outcrop in Chinagraph. "Watch out for a land-slip debris approaching on your right." Perkis changed down.

After ten miles of rocky terrain they crossed over a dusty secondary road that ran due north and continued on at speed on a north-westerly bearing, skirting the edge of a vast salt bowl within the Zagros range.

At 0330 hours they crossed over another road that led south to the disused airfield at Lordakan. If all went well, Alpha Zulu would land there to pick them up in six days' time, but in the intervening period they would keep well clear of the rendezvous point, establishing their main base twelve miles to the north.

The early morning light was spreading across the eastern sky as the first of the two Land Rovers picked its way through the wooded river valley and up to a narrow ravine that cut

into the mountains like a slice from a cake. Perkis hauled on the handbrake and killed the engine. He stepped out into the undergrowth as Panther Two nosed under the trees. As the noise of the second engine faded, the eight men looked round at their new surroundings. Dawn cast a pale golden glimmer. Birds began to chatter around the new arrivals. Insects called from the ferns, and fresh water tinkled musically from somewhere nearby.

Above them, the crumbling yellow face of the mountain was painted in the first wash of sunlight. From up there they would have a commanding view of the valley spread out below them.

"Welcome to yer new home, boys," Kangers Webster drawled.

"I'm shagged," Perkis said with feeling, leaning back in his seat.

Hidden deep in the Zagros Mountains, Snapdragon went to ground for the daylight hours. Isfahan was just one mountain range and seventy-five miles away.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TEHERAN: 0600 hrs, Sunday 14th September

The next morning found Colonel Najaf Murad of SAVAMA in pensive mood, pacing the carpeted floor of his Teheran office like a caged lion. He stubbed out his cigarette in the ashtray with slow deliberation before returning to his desk to read the signal from his contact in Switzerland for the fourth time.

Geneva 13/9/80
Re: Inquiry of Mulcruf Foundation in Geneva.

On investigation, I find that the above no longer occupies the stated premises. Those were comprised of one reception room in a quiet backstreet neighbourhood and were rented by Mulcruf from the period 3.1.78 to 19.11.78. They were normally unoccupied during that time, but someone would call in once a week to collect mail. No telephone or telex machine was installed.

Mulcruf de-registered as a charity in late 1978. The two principals were recorded as having been an Iranian immigrant called Mr. I. Hassan-'Ali, an American citizen living in Florida and a Canadian named as Mr. J. Hussein of Toronto.

If you wish me to conduct further inquiries, please advise.

Murad snorted. Hassan-'Ali and Hussein. The Iranian equivalents of Smith and Jones.

He reached forward and pressed the play button on the cassette recorder. It was a slow and painful tape of the journalist Blake's knowledge of the Mulcruf Foundation.

If the man was to be believed, Sabs Karemi's report declared the Foundation to be a considerable source of political and financial support to Khomeini during his exile in Paris. Cheques would arrive regularly and, over a period, had mounted to several million dollars. In some of the very

few letters sent by the Foundation, promises of international political influence were made and, apparently, these held good. That, Blake had protested, was the limit of his knowledge about the Mulcruf Foundation. Whoever they were, Hassan-'Ali and Hussein had access to some pretty powerful and wealthy people.

Still that word MULCRUF puzzled him.

He opened the top drawer of his desk and extracted a fresh sheet of paper.

Hurriedly he wrote out the word in full, leaving a space between each letter: MULCRUF.

Underneath that he wrote MURCFUL, then CRUMFUL.

God, how he hated crosswords and anagrams.

He stared at the sheet for a full minute. His mind was a blank. Then, suddenly, he reached forward and underlined the letters FUL in red ink.

Very slowly he added . . . CRUM.

FULCRUM.

Murad looked at the word for a moment, then reached for the oak bookcase behind him. He drew out a battered English dictionary, with a leather binding that had seen better days. He flicked through it until he found the entry he wanted.

FULCRUM (pl. fulcra) (fulkRUM) n. pivot about which a lever turns; (fig.) means used to attain an end.

At least, he consoled himself, that was a recognisable word.

ISFAHAN: 0600 hrs, Wednesday 17th September

Three days after Colonel Murad had worked on the mysterious anagram in Teheran, two unkempt Iranian travellers were crossing the Zayandeh River in Isfahan by the magnificent Khaju weir bridge.

They had probably been there before, because they paid no heed to the ornate Safavid design, with its beautiful two-tier construction spanning twenty-four enormous piers,

its arcade, or its central pavilion. They did not even spare a glance for the playful antics of the children splashing on the steps downstream.

Perhaps they were tired; they were certainly dirty from their journey, a thin layer of dust covering their worn jeans and jackets. Perhaps they were just intent on arriving at their destination.

The broader of the two men, who wore a woollen cap, waved cheerfully at a group of revolutionary guards gathered on the other side of the bridge. They called back: "*Allahu akbar*!" God is great.

The other man, taller and thinner, with a hawkish bearded face, inclined his head with approval.

"*Allahu akbar!*" he said, adding under his breath, "He sure is . . . to have got us this far."

"Just how I imagined it," Forbes muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

The SAS sergeant was feeling pleased with himself. He had kept up with Hawksby over the devastating two-night hack which had taken them over a mountain fold and into the flatter fertile plain around Isfahan. Earlier that morning they had left the other two members of the Sabre team, Tiger and Kangers Webster, at a temporary riverside hide, some twenty miles to the south-west. The two Farsi-speakers in the team had pushed on at night to the Russian-built steel mill complex on the outskirts of the new township of Riz. It had been easy there to hitch a lift on a flatwagon that threaded its way along the freight railroad, past the outlying villages and mines to the perimeter of Isfahan itself.

As dawn broke, they had mingled easily with the workers on their way to their daily toil. Their destination was a house in the labyrinth of narrow streets that made up the bazaar district to the north of the central Royal Square. The usual adornment of a black flag hung outside each crumbling house, signifying that its owner supported the Islamic Revolution.

Hawksby stopped outside a battered wooden door set in a high wall. There were no markings, no number and no nameplate.

"You sure this is it?" Forbes asked, nodding pointedly towards the limp flag.

Hawksby almost smiled. "Trust Allah." He knocked three times rapidly.

Almost immediately they heard a bolt shift and the door creaked open on its hinges. Both men were immediately aware of the beautiful dark eyes from the face slit in the black *chador* that covered the woman from head to foot.

Her voice was soft. "Peace be with you and your friend. Can I help you?"

"You are kind," Hawksby said, slipping into the fluent Persian identification code. "My friend and I are weary from travel. We seek rest and the name of a good silversmith, for I am here to do business."

The woman's eyelids fluttered as she glanced from the major to Forbes. "Then it is your good fortune to come to this door. My uncle is the best silversmith in Isfahan. But first you must rest and eat."

She stepped back, and the door in the wall swung open onto a small cobbled courtyard surrounded by shrubs. A solitary songbird hidden in the undergrowth emphasised the peace and stillness of the place. Water cascaded and gurgled in a small ceramic fountain.

The men looked around them while the woman re-bolted the door, then led them through an archway into a small whitewashed room beyond the fountain. A soft, intricately-patterned carpet covered the floor, and a white-haired man with a dark beard sat on one of the scattered cushions which had been thrown around a low table.

"Our guests have arrived, Curt," the woman said.

The American climbed to his feet and extended his hand in a firm handshake. "I'm Curt Swartz. You guys must've had one hell of a journey."

"It's had its moments," Hawksby admitted.

The woman released her face veil and pushed back the hood of her *chador*. Forbes was taken with her sultry beauty, immediately deciding that beneath the shapeless hang of her robes was the sort of full, firm figure he preferred.

"This is Hameda," Curt said. "She's been responsible for

finding out all the information about our friend Blake. At great personal risk to herself, I might add."

The girl looked embarrassed. Hawksby touched his forehead. "We're most grateful."

"Very," Forbes added with a grin that was in danger of becoming permanent.

"Forgive me if we dispense with full names, Curt," the major said lightly. "You may call me Alan and my colleague here is Dave."

"Of course, I understand. You guys certainly didn't get into this country by taking chances, and you certainly won't get out of it again if you do."

Hawksby looked out of the cool room at the contrasting brilliance of the courtyard. "Talking of precautions, may I ask who owns this place?"

It was the girl who replied. "It is my uncle's house. He really is a silversmith. He knows I am entertaining friends but, of course, he does not know who."

"I should hope not," Forbes muttered.

"He's a pro-Westerner?" Hawksby asked.

She shook her head. "Not really. But he is pro-me. He is a kind and lovely man and he is very fond of me. He paid for my education although he is not very rich." Hameda smiled bashfully. "But I would not wish to embarrass him. Abbas, that is his name, will be home at noon for a rest. It is best that we all be gone by then."

Hawksby said: "I'd like to leave as soon as possible."

"Not before you have eaten and are refreshed," Curt replied, smiling.

"You're getting too Persian for your own good," the major chided.

Curt shrugged. "In this country it's the only way to survive. Like the rest of the Middle East, you can't rush 'em. So you may as well drift along with the tide."

The girl went into an adjoining room and reappeared after a few minutes with a tray of food which she laid out on the low table. "I am afraid it is not much. Kebabs, cucumber and some yoghurt to drink. Oh, and, of course, melon. Isfahan is famous for its melons."

Forbes felt himself relaxing involuntarily after the rigours of the past few days. His mouth began to water at the sight of the food on two silver trays. Each had been intricately worked by hand, using just a hammer, gouging nail and a craftsman's eye. "It looks like a feast to me," he said appreciatively.

Hameda smiled and blushed. He was such a big man, this mysterious soldier from the West. In her mind, she could imagine his strength, and yet he seemed so gentle.

"These goddamn people would give you the last crust off their plate, Alan," Curt said, reaching for some meat. "Any passing traveller will get the same generous treatment. Until Khomeini arrived, that included Westerners. And if you say you like something, whatever it is you've been admiring, they're likely to give it to you. I've even known café owners to give free tea and bread when they're in the mood. Amazing goddamn place."

Hawksby agreed. "I lived here in my childhood, Curt. I know what you mean. You soon get attached to the place and the people."

"Not the sort of image it's got for itself at the moment," Forbes said through a mouthful of kebab.

"If I said in Washington now what I just said to you," Curt replied, "I'd be lynched on a bloody yellow ribbon. Those religious creeps have a lot to answer for. Poor goddamn peasants didn't know what they were lettin' themselves into. And it'll be one helluva job gettin' rid of the bastards now. They're clinging onto power like leeches and turning the whole of Iran into a virtual Gestapo police state."

Forbes frowned. "That's a bit of an exaggeration, isn't it?" He licked his fingers.

"I don't think so. These damn mullahs have been pretty quick to learn the black arts of suppression." The American held up his right hand, raising his index finger. "One. Where do these illiterate bastards get news and views of what's goin' on in the world? Answer: over half of 'em get it from one of the 80,000 local mosques. And that ain't exactly unbiased NBC reporting.

"Two. There's a unit of revolutionary guards attached to

each mosque and they're commanded by a mullah. And each mosque also acts as a bank, givin' interest-free credit. Those bastards provide finance for an entire quarter of the population, and they know *everything* about the poor little sods on their books! Khomeini and Beheshti have a built-in intelligence system, which is growin' like bindweed. Now children are being instructed by the mullahs in the old Nazi and Stalin tricks of spyin' and reportin' on the *misdemeanours* of their parents. Ah, shit, it makes me sick!"

Curt stopped in full flow and glanced up at Hameda. Suddenly the waterfall outside sounded very loud. "Sorry, sweetheart, I shouldn't let off steam like that."

She didn't smile. "Allah will see that justice is done."

"Perhaps we can give Him a little help," Hawksby said.

Curt laughed harshly. "Anything to get rid of these bloodsuckers, Alan, anything. That's why I welcomed the chance to help you, although it's strictly against official orders. You know that?"

Forbes said: "We know nothing."

"Of course." The American sipped at his yoghurt. "Hameda and I want to assist even if it doesn't help the case of our own hostages. The White House has been got by the short an' curlies, so it's got to kowtow to these shits in Teheran. But *you* don't have to. I welcome anything that will help to unsettle this regime and maybe topple it. Christ knows, even the bloody Commies would be better than this lot."

On Curt's insistence, the two men took an hour's catnap and it was approaching noon before Hawksby and the sergeant stepped out from the door in the wall into the baking dusty street.

Forbes had to admit that he was impressed with Isfahan, not least because the garden city, despite being the second largest in Iran, was every bit as charming as Hawksby had promised it would be. A world of gold and blue domes and minarets. It was only the occasional sight of gaggles of revolutionary guards that shook him from his soporific mood.

Following Hameda's instructions, they crossed the central reservation of the crowded main south-north Tchahar Bagh Avenue and wove their way towards the plush residential district around Saeb Avenue. They had no difficulty in locating the villa they were looking for. Three guards were standing and gossiping under the plane trees outside its imposing twelve foot walls, along the top of which ran coils of barbed wire.

Slowly the two Iranian travellers sauntered past, engaged in a heated debate about the price one had paid for the other's goat. "You took advantage that I was sick." "Nonsense. As God is my witness, I did you a favour." "My wife does not know of such things. You tricked her!" "How was I to know how high the market price would go?"

They prodded each other's chests with mounting animosity as they stopped opposite the entrance to the villa. The guards watched with amusement as the men almost came to blows.

"Hey!" one called after a few minutes. "Why not go to your mosque and ask your mullah to adjudicate which of you is right?"

"Bah!" said the big bearded protagonist. "He would say we are both wrong and take the goat for himself!" The guards laughed amongst themselves as the two peasants strolled on.

"Twelve foot high gate," Hawksby said. "Pretty solid."

"Studded oak, I think," Forbes added.

"Need HE to shift it. A bit messy."

"Should've brought a rocket launcher after all."

"Still make too much noise. Don't forget we've got to get out of this place afterwards." Hawksby considered for a moment. "I think a more subtle approach is called for. Come on, let's have a look round the back."

They took a leisurely walk down to the start of the ancient Marnan footbridge, then turned left along the embankment of the Zayandeh river. The shade of the poplars provided relief from the hot afternoon sun.

The same high wall ran behind the treeline where the villa backed onto the water. Again the wicked coils of modern razor-edged barbed wire glinted in the sunlight. There were

no gates or other apertures and only one guard was on the other side, evidently standing on a walkway or platform.

"That looks better for the initial approach," Hawksby decided. "Trees for cover and we can come straight across the river at night."

"That remote TV camera could give us trouble."

"If it works."

"That looks like the telephone cable. Did you see the power-line at the front?"

Hawksby nodded. "Yes, but why mess about? I'd rather knock out the whole city. Even here people have come to rely on electricity."

"Funny, isn't it?"

"What?"

"To think old Blake is sittin' somewhere behind that wall."

Hawksby sniffed. "I bloody well hope he is, anyway. Come on, let's cross the Marnan bridge. We might get a better view over that wall."

Their last task that afternoon was to visit Isfahan Airport on the south-east outskirts of the city. First changing into overalls they had been carrying in their holdalls, Hawksby and Forbes approached one of the security gates used by airport workers.

After a nerve-cracking few moments when the guard was evidently puzzled why he did not recognise the faces on the forged passes that had been supplied by Curt Swartz Jnr., they were in. Hawksby's explanation that they had been sent down from Teheran Airport to make up staff shortages seemed to satisfy the man.

Once inside the vast dusty airfield it was an easy matter to locate the helicopter park. There were plenty of the machines, as Iran had its own massive manufacturing plant at Shiraz and, with the vast distances to be crossed, flying was often the most viable means of transport for wealthier businessmen. So many had fled since the Revolution, the park was now filled to overflowing.

Hawksby approached a mechanic who was taking a much

extended lunchtime snooze in the shade of one of the machines.

"We've been sent to do a survey of serviceable helicopters," Hawksby said in an officious tone.

The man shielded his eyes from the sun as he looked up at the two strangers. "You're the fourth this year. You head office people don't know your left from your right hand!"

Hawksby peered disdainfully down his nose. "Your insolence has been noted. I am here to sort out the mess they made of the other three surveys. *This* time it will be correct. I want you to recommend the best six helicopters and we will test them."

"Now get up," Forbes growled. "If Allah had meant you to spend your life on your bottom he'd have given you the figure of a woman!"

Reluctantly the mechanic showed them along the long line of abandoned helicopters and selected half-a-dozen that he swore were airworthy.

Forbes then proceeded to try them in turn, revving up each until it was about to lift from the ground. Half were flying death-traps, some cannibalised of vital parts. Of the remaining three only one, a Bell JetRanger, had a full tank of kerosene.

"Will it get us there, Dave?" Hawksby asked.

Forbes shrugged. "It'll have to." He opened the engine cowl and extracted the igniter plug, placing it carefully in his overall pocket. "Short of actually taking off, I don't know what other surprises it may have. At least it's got fuel."

Hawksby seemed satisfied. "Even if it doesn't last the whole course, it'll get us out of Isfahan. And the Iranians don't like flying at night."

"Like the old American injuns?"

The major nodded.

"I just hope *they* know they don't like flying at night."

The twenty mile journey back to the Sabre team's hideout took until late evening. Hawksby and Forbes went by the same route they had used that morning, catching a return lift on a railway wagon bringing in ore from Zarand.

Alighting into railside shrubbery as the train neared the Arya-Mehr steel complex, they moved swiftly overland on foot for the remaining six miles.

"You see any of them voluptuous belly-dancers?" Kangers demanded of Forbes.

The sergeant was tired. "Haven't you learned anything during mission preparations, you ignorant bloody Aussie!" he snapped.

Kangers looked hurt. "Well you've been gone s' bleedin' long we thought you must've had your leg over somethin', yer miserable Pom!"

"You wouldn't say that if you saw the old bags we did," Forbes replied. "We now know why old Crazy K insists the women cover their faces. He can't stand the bloody sight of 'em!"

At precisely 1205 Tiger tapped out a high-speed coded Morse message on the radio: *Dragon One to Dragon Two. Tomorrow night Plan A. Over.*

Fifty-five miles to the south, deep in the Zagros Mountains, the four men of McDermid's Sabre team sat around Panther Two expectantly as Pogo operated the vehicle's radio. The big Fijian's face lit up as he translated the message.

McDermid grinned. "Canny bastards. I knew the Hawk'd pull it off." He nodded towards the transceiver behind the front seats. "Okay, just acknowledge, then put oot a long-distance to Oman."

Pogo nodded, his usual serious expression having returned.

The Scotsman stood up and breathed deeply on the chill night air. "I feel better fer hearin' that, laddies. I reckon we're as good as home'n'dry."

That night Forbes crashed out into an exhausted sleep. Hawksby, however, awoke in the early hours, his mind spinning with recollections of the past few days and worries about the challenge to come. He tossed around restlessly for an hour but couldn't get back to sleep. There were too many nagging questions at the back of his mind. Not least was why

was Blake wanted and why was it so important not to tell at least the SAS team leader? That was fairly unusual. As old allies the secret service normally put the SAS in the picture. Or part of it. Not this time. Zilch.

During the day that followed a series of animated and heated discussions developed amongst the group as to how best to execute the operation. Each idea was carefully examined for faults or shortcomings, and then rejected or put to one side for possible use.

Having become closer to the major during their joint reconnaissance, Dave Forbes now found the distance between them growing again. The Hawk had stronger and more distinct views about how things should be done than most other SAS commanders under whom he had served. When Hawksby put forward his ideas, they were pitched in such a way that it dared anyone to challenge them. That acted like a red rag to a bull with the sergeant who proceeded to query every detail. It was as though he was part of an SAS officer training course, trying to upset a new recruit who was unused to having his orders queried.

Hawksby, although restrained, was becoming visibly more irritated with Forbes' endless criticisms. In the end, Kangers Webster said, exasperated: "For Chrissakes, Dave, what's gotten into you? D'ya want to plan the entire op by yerself?"

Startled by the outburst, Forbes looked sheepish. "Sorry, boys, I just want to be sure we've got it right." He glanced at Hawksby. "Sorry, boss, if I've been making heavy weather of things."

Hawksby looked quizically at the veteran SAS sergeant. "That's all right," he said quietly. "It's a nerve-racking time for all of us."

Kangers and Tiger Ratna exchanged glances.

TEHERAN: 1900 hrs, Thursday 18th September

The call from Paris that Colonel Najaf Murad had been so anxiously awaiting did not finally get put through until early evening.

At that moment the office was particularly quiet, and the sudden strident call made the SAVAMA officer jump. But his voice was as quiet and calm as always when he spoke.

"You took your time."

"The problems are at your end, Colonel. What's happened to our country? Communications seem to be a shambles like everything else."

Murad chuckled. "That's traitorous talk nowadays, my friend. Now tell me, what have you found out? Oh, wait a moment." He reached beneath his desk and turned off the tape recorder. "That's fine."

He listened patiently and without interruption as his ex-SAVAK colleague, who had been wise enough to keep out of the country since Khomeini's return, recounted his further investigations into the Mulcruf Foundation.

The two trustees had, as he suspected, vanished without trace back in 1978. A dead-end had been reached almost immediately on the American, Hassan-'Ali. He appeared not to have existed before or since he rented a short-lease apartment in Florida.

There was more luck with the Canadian, Hussein, who evidently supplied the money. He had opened an account at a Canadian bank with a cheque for $200,000, drawn on an unlimited British company called Zenith Exports with a registration address at a firm of solicitors in London's Whitechapel. That company's owner, a man called 'John Roberts', had subsequently disappeared from the face of the earth. However, Murad's diligent researcher had managed to establish that Zenith's main customer and benefactor was a small Wiltshire dairy products company with a farmhouse address. Two of the directors were a husband and wife; the third name was 'Ian Jones'.

A British private investigator had been hired to find out about the business, but it transpired that there was little to tell. A mutual friend had introduced the man called 'Jones', who persuaded the farmer and his wife to act as 'sleeping partners' in his dairy products business, although it appeared that they never actually sold so much as a pint of milk. 'Jones' had put in all the money in the two years of the

operation, and they received a handsome £20,000 annual salary for just signing the necessary legal documents. They knew they were not to ask questions, and they didn't. Then, in 1978, the company was put into voluntary liquidation with all outstanding debts settled. Very neat, very clever, and all loose ends sewn up.

The couple had not seen 'Mr. Jones' from that day to this.

Pushing his investigations further, the private detective had managed to secure a blurred family album photograph of the farmer, his wife and two children in which 'Mr. Jones' appeared, evidently trying to get out of shot in the shadow of a tree. However, the distinctive black moustache was unmistakable.

Colonel Murad's agent had met Ian Stanton Ferguson, Deputy Head of the British SIS Middle East section too many times from his Colonial Office days not to recognise him instantly.

By the time the colonel had hung up his heart was pounding. Reaching forward he poured a glass of iced water from the crystal jug on his desk. He turned the implications of the discovery over in his mind. If Britain had been behind the Mulcruf Foundation it meant that they had also supported Ayatollah Khomeini in exile. It might even be said that they were instrumental in his return to power and the downfall of the Shah. He shook his head to clear his mind; it just didn't make sense.

If there was just the smallest grain of truth in the story, Britain would surely be desperate to keep it secret. After all, it would hardly endear them to the Americans, or their NATO allies. And how would the Imam and the Revolutionary Council react if they knew that the British – perhaps even with the connivance of the Americans – had secretly helped bring him to power? Just the whiff of such a scandal could be enough to bring Khomeini crashing down and throw the country into open civil war.

He thought of Blake, and the original discovery by Sabs Karemi. Just how much did the journalist know? He had had no real reason to disbelieve the man when he had admitted that he had read about the Mulcruf Foundation. After all, he

had been under pressure of the torture threat to his girlfriend. Already he had been deeply shaken by the mock execution earlier, so his senses should have been so shattered as to find telling the truth painfully irresistible.

Perhaps, my friend, you are tougher than you look, Murad thought savagely. If Karemi was so sure that he could lure you into helping him, then in view of this new discovery, he must have thrown you a few more juicier morsels . . .

He did not give many chances for Blake's survival now. Once the Imam realised what the journalist knew he would insist on his execution – foreign national or not. And if he were ever to be released, then Murad was sure that the British would silence him. How could they risk the man on the loose with such information?

The colonel suddenly realised the momentous importance of his discovery. Now he was a party to that forbidden secret. He knew that in Iran the price of such knowledge could be death. But elsewhere? Elsewhere such knowledge could be profoundly rewarding. Before this went any further he would have to establish the fullest extent of Blake's knowledge. He would leave for Isfahan immediately.

Murad's aide burst in. "Trouble, Colonel. I think that Khalkali's still raging because you took his prisoners from him. He's been stirring up the Revolutionary Council and now they're baying for your blood. You are to report to them this evening and they expect answers!"

Damn! The colonel thumped his fist on the desk in a rare gesture of rage. Iced water slopped from the glass onto the leather top.

Being a perceptive young man, the aide thought it unwise to say more. Instead he just went to the OUT-tray and lifted the stack of files of suspected traitors and the signed detention orders.

The name on the third file from the top of the stack was *Hameda Gulistani*.

Ayatollah Khomeini closed his eyes and sat, cross-legged, in silence.

Beheshti's eyes burned darkly above the thin crooked nose as he watched his leader with increasing alarm. Such news could finally kill off the old man, such was his ailing state of health.

For once, even Khalkali was silent.

Colonel Murad, seated on the carpet before the trio, attempted to collect some saliva into his parched throat. Since deciding to reveal all that he knew, his body seemed to have dehydrated involuntarily. He could feel the sweat soaking into his silk shirt down the length of his back. His palms left damp imprints on his carefully pressed suit trousers.

He knew that if they didn't like what he had said, he could be a dead man by morning.

Suddenly Khomeini's eyes flickered open, his decision made. "It is a plot against us," he said with slow deliberation.

Beheshti and Khalkali leaned forward to catch his words.

"It is the work of the Great Satan America and its partner in crime Britain," the Imam continued. "It is all a snake's nest of lies. The venom must be removed and the reptiles put to death. God's truth must prevail."

Beheshi's eyes glittered. "*Agha*, might it not be unwise to kill the man Blake until the colonel has been able to extract more from him?"

The face of the old man looked tired, but it was set in an expression of grim determination. "Why extract more lies? Put him to death and his lies die with him."

"But it will also draw attention to him," Beheshti persisted. "We have not yet killed a foreign national, and the international furore would get everyone asking questions."

The Imam's wisdom was not to be so easily shaken. "You cannot ask questions of a dead man. My dear Beheshti, you should use those brains with which God has blessed you. Fill the snake-pit with acid. Destroy the purveyor of lies. The man Karemi is dead because he could not live with himself in the knowledge that he had committed blasphemy with his lies. Blake is like a messenger pigeon that has not left the cote.

If we do not let him leave the cote, then he has no message to deliver."

Murad suddenly got the distinct feeling that the old man knew. Knew that all the time he had been manipulated by foreign powers, but just didn't care. In his turn he had just accepted their money and influence, and made the most of it. The very thought chilled him.

Beheshti looked at Murad for inspiration, but was met with the man's professional mask of indifference. Unlike the Imam, he was unable to view life with the same medieval simplicity. It was, anyway, obvious that the wise old man would not last forever and it was he, Beheshti, as the unobtrusive power behind the Islamic Republican Party, who would have to contend with whatever trouble was brewing behind this whole Mulcruf Foundation affair. For all he knew the plot could involve the rivals of the Majlis in the conspiracy. He knew full well that the apparent British involvement could be just the tip of an iceberg. Maybe the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party or the Mojahedin were involved, or the Shah's supporters in exile. No, he must know more.

Khomeini waved his hand dismissively. "Ours is the world's first government of God and nothing must be allowed to blemish its name. I command you to destroy the man and the woman. Let that be an end to it. In all my long life I have never been wrong about what I say." He waved for his son Hamad to assist him to his feet.

When Murad stepped out into the cool night air, he found that Beheshti's green Range Rover was still outside, surrounded by his armed henchmen. Then one of the tinted windows was wound down, and the colonel saw the ayatollah signal to him.

"Colonel," said Beheshti, "you must obviously do what the Imam says. But the usual time for execution is dawn and it is now only eight o'clock. Go to the prisoner in Isfahan tonight. I am sure you can learn a lot before the sun rises. I should be most grateful." His dark eyes seemed to penetrate the security man's skull with their unblinking gaze. "Do I make myself understood?"

Without pausing for the reply, Beheshti wound up the

window. Murad was left standing in the swirling dust-storm as the Range Rover accelerated away.

For once in his life Colonel Najaf Murad felt uncertain, and very alone.

It was time to look for help elsewhere.

CHAPTER EIGHT

OUTSIDE ISFAHAN: 1900 hrs, Thursday 18th September

Well before nightfall everything was settled.

After a final briefing the Snapdragon team relaxed over a hastily-prepared concoction from self-heating Compo ration cans. A liberal sprinkling of curry powder made it almost edible.

Then the last-minute preparations began in earnest. Over dark green fatigues were slipped specially-tailored olive drab field jackets. These had been provided back at Hereford, based on recent photographs of what revolutionary guards were currently wearing. Although the garments looked the same, they had larger reinforced pockets and were cut loose in traditional SAS style with room for a lot of movement around the arms.

Each man wore a single belt-order rather than the mass of webbing carried by traditional British Army units, which becomes heavy and uncomfortable when wet. To this were fixed a number of large olive plastic respirator cases, in place of pouches, for medical kits, emergency dried rations and ammunition. In addition they took two metal water bottles apiece. All fittings used single popper-studs reinforced with self-cling Velcro.

The entire team was armed with Israeli-designed Uzis. Their simple, no-nonsense design made them ideal for desert conditions. They were easy to conceal, as well as offering a standardisation of ammunition with the soldiers' 9 mm Browning automatic pistols. Hawksby had insisted on the Uzis in preference to the cumbersome West German Heckler & Koch G3s which the revolutionary guards were now sporting. If anyone noticed that his men's guns were differ-

ent, the obvious assumption would be that they were an elite unit. That suited Hawksby's plans well. The major didn't encourage prima donnas when it came to weapons selection, and he considered it crucial to standardise everything as much as possible. It may be fine in the movies with each man expert with a different weapon, but in a firefight, if you ran out of 9 mm ammunition, it was no good if your colleague could only offer 7.62 mm cartridges.

Everyone carried a standard fighting knife. Additional pump-action Remington repeater shotguns with snap-down skeleton butts were taken by Kangers and Tiger to deal primarily with locked doors and what the Australian euphemistically referred to as 'crowd control'. They packed their own 12-gauge solid shot and 1 oz slugs.

A minimum number of magazines were distributed amongst the men to keep down weight. It took only seconds for an expert to fill up an empty clip with loose rounds. A small selection of L2 fragmentation, smoke, incendiary and stun-grenades were handed out, together with illumination flares. As the explosives expert, Forbes had the additional burden of a dozen special 1 lb SAS-packs of PE4 and a variety of fuses. Far from complaining at the extra load, he was more anxious to have the chance to use the stuff.

Like the others, he stowed this additional paraphernalia for the mission into a small lightweight back-pack, along with flotation bags, toggle ropes, wire-cutters, line, and IWS Starlight 'scopes for night viewing. They also took a change of clothing that would be needed before the night was through.

All sleeping kit and camping equipment was discarded, buried in a pit deep in the river reedbeds.

Kangers took the Clansman radio for contact with the base team, but VHF Pye Pocketfones were worn by each soldier for secure short-distance communication amongst the four. The 'talking brooches' were discreet and uncumbersome, with a throat-mike and a small receiver earpiece.

With spirits high and the adrenalin pumping hard, the team ate up the six mile hack to the Arya-Mehr steel works in a mere thirty minutes, trotting most of the distance. Finally

they were overlooking the vehicle compound that Hawksby and Forbes had earmarked during their earlier reconnaissance.

Tiger excelled himself as the team's master locksmith and was swinging open the tall gates within forty-five seconds. Selecting a nondescript 1½ ton Simca truck with a canvas cargo body, it took only a further minute under the bonnet for Forbes to get it started. Closing the gates behind them, they set off towards Isfahan ahead of schedule. To cheerfully disrespectful wolf-whistles from the rest of the team, Hawksby donned a white turban and brown mullah's robe. That done, they raised the canvas sidescreens to be in full view of everyone they passed.

The curfew situation was very fluid and uncertain, depending largely on the whim of the local Revolutionary Council, and Hawksby had decided that the best approach was to brazen it out rather than risk driving surreptitiously down the narrow streets. Iranian militia patrols, he reasoned, would not be so keen to apprehend an authoritative-looking mullah and his gun-happy henchmen.

The major's decision paid off, for they travelled without interruption to their first destination, a remote spot in the north-west of the town on the main Isfahan-Qum-Teheran road. The Simca pulled over into a roadside copse while Forbes busied himself strapping the green cardboard-covered block of PE4 to a pole that carried the main telephone link to the capital. He screwed the detonator of the clockwork time fuse into the small aperture in the pack of plastic explosive, checked his watch, and set the dial for exactly four hours and three minutes.

He gave his handiwork one last admiring glance. At precisely 0145 Iranian time Isfahan would lose all contact with the outside world. Unable to communicate with their superiors in Teheran, the local revolutionary guards and Gendarmerie would be running around like chickens who'd lost their heads.

The urgent squawk of the truck's hooter spurred the sergeant on. He hurriedly stowed his kit and returned to the others.

"You can't hurry a masterpiece like that," he grumbled, scrambling in as Tiger swung the vehicle onto the road.

"We can't allow for your artistic temperament, Dave. We've only got an hour to do the pylons," Hawksby said.

Forbes lit a cigarette, his mind still on the detonation he had just prepared. "That should roast Buzby's feathers for him, all right."

They continued north, taking the next left-hand turn which took them eastwards, arcing in a wide loop back towards Isfahan. It also took them past one of the massive pylons, on the edge of the outlying town of Homayunshahr. The giant steel legs carried the overhead power cables from the lakeside Zayandeh hydro-electric dam fifty miles to the west.

Laying a suitable combination of charges to bring down the pylon took Forbes and Kangers a full thirty minutes. Using twin packs of PE4 at each station, they set charges at two of the steel feet and two more up on the cross-bracings on the same side. Synchronising the time-fuses was tricky but, when they all went, the pylon would collapse to its knees. Forbes' nagging fear was that a spark would leap the necessary six feet to set off a charge prematurely.

They were still running to schedule when they climbed back into the Simca for the last leg of the journey back to Isfahan. They followed the river until they reached a quiet, dark side road, lined with plane trees. Tiger switched off the engine and beckoned Forbes to join the others in the back. Kangers and Tiger rolled down the canvas top over the cargo body frame, shutting off the outside world as they climbed in.

"Let's synchronise," the major said. "1155 hours."

Around him hunched figures nodded in agreement. In the dim light the pale faces looked tight and tense. There was no humour in anyone's eyes. For once, no one joked.

"That gives us five minutes," Hawksby continued. "Is everyone happy with what they've got to do?"

It was a perfunctory query. At this stage he would not expect anyone to have a question that hadn't already been discussed. Just an element of fine tuning, perhaps?

No one spoke. Glances were exchanged. Heads shook.

Everything settled. The plan clear. They were anxious to be going.

"Good. No last minute questions then?" Hawksby asked unnecessarily. He could feel the nerves flexing uncomfortably in his guts.

"Just one." It was Kangers.

Hawksby raised his eyebrows. Surprised.

"Can I be RTU'd now, please?"

The sudden choke of suppressed laughter was like the welcome relief of a safety-valve.

To Forbes' surprise, Hawksby grinned widely.

The Australian shrugged. "It was worth a try."

Hawksby slipped his back-pack over one shoulder beneath his robe, and gathered the folds of material around the Uzi. "Ready, Tiger? Give us five minutes, then you two leave. Okay?"

"Good luck, boss," Forbes said.

"*Tashakkur*," Hawksby replied with a smile. He leapt agilely over the tail board, with the small Gurkha close on his heels.

Precisely five minutes later, their faces and hands striped with camouflage cream, the sergeant and the Australian climbed out and melted into the shadows.

"Just the two of them then," Kangers Webster confirmed. He was studying the green semi-negative scene of the riverside mansion through the Starlight 'scope.

"One at the rear wall," Forbes said, "and one on the roof."

As if to emphasise the point a searchlight came on, blinding the 'shuftiscope'.

The faint whine stopped as the Australian turned off the night-sight and carefully replaced it in the waterproof carrying-case clipped to his belt. "That's a bit of a sod."

The sergeant's teeth glistened in the darkness. "You want it with cherries on?"

"I'm all for the easy life. Trouble is it's so damn cold, they'll be alert."

Forbes grunted. "They'll have to be."

"You want to change the plan? I mean you and that wop

can't share the roof. It just ain't big enough for the two of you."

"Stop talking like bloody Wyatt Earp." Forbes picked up the coil of nylon rope he had secured to the base of a willow tree at the water's edge. He shackled it to the harness belt around his waist.

"I suppose you can swim, Dave?"

Forbes swung the black polythene bag in a half-circle, filling the gaping mouth with air. "I got my proficiency badge in the Cubs."

"Anyone ever tell you you're over-qualified for this job?" Kangers said as he watched the sergeant's Uzi and back-pack disappear into the flotation bag.

Pausing with his parachute ankle boots in the water, Forbes said: "In case I get water in my mike, I'll just give three tugs on the line, right? Then you skin across."

"Check." He slapped the sergeant on the arm. "Keep your arse down. I always want to remember it like it is now."

"Piss off," Forbes replied, and waded into the gurgling, sluggish current of the Zayandeh as Kangers played out the blackened rope.

Within seconds the soldier's bulky form was lost from view as he paddled himself gently downstream behind the inflated bag. During this season of the year the river was very shallow in places and he found himself on hands and knees a lot of the way. He hardly noticed the chill temperature of the water, as the sense of danger and anticipation kept his own body heat high. His heavy boots caused the most discomfort, together with the cooling swirl around his crutch.

It took just ten minutes before his feet touched the pebbles on the other side of the river. Forbes estimated it to be about a hundred and twenty five yards at that point. Slowly and quietly he dragged his sodden bulk out of the water and rolled into the comparative dryness of a reedbed. Within seconds he had the Uzi in his hands as he began a systematic study of the approach to the rear of the villa. There was no one about and the only sign of life came from the parapet of the garden wall where a revolutionary guard occasionally played the heavy-duty searchlight along a span of the river-

side walk. It was casual, careless and unprofessional. Forbes smiled to himself.

He reached down and gave the rope three hard tugs. Then he began winding in the slack as he felt movement on the other end.

Kangers' progress was much quicker until he reached the halfway mark. There he slipped the small lead weight over the rope. With a hiss and a ripple the rope submerged. After that the going was slower until he was almost at the water's edge.

"Okay?" Forbes whispered.

The Australian nodded, and began to extract the kit from his flotation bag. After a moment he tapped Forbes on the shoulder.

"Let's get on," the sergeant said. He began wading around the edge of the reedbed to avoid making an otherwise inevitable noise. Following behind, Kangers played out the slack rope.

One hundred yards upstream they found themselves directly opposite the villa wall. Now the rope to the opposite bank was running with the current.

Forbes checked his watch. 0130 hours. Fifteen minutes to go. Above them the upstretched hands of the riverside poplars rustled in the cool night breeze. The waters of the Zayandeh lapped around the shallow embankment. Somewhere on the other side of the mansion wall a man coughed. The noises of the secret insect world began to cocoon them as though some hidden hand had slowly turned up the volume. They settled down to wait. It was going to be a long fifteen minutes.

Iraj was not a malicious man. Despite his outwardly aggressive and surly manner, he was really a simple soul.

Although he could read and write, which gave him an advantage over the majority of Iranians, he was not very intelligent. He had easily fallen prey to the fervour and angry resentment that had swept the country during the Revolution. Irresistibly, he had been drawn into the rhetoric and

petty viciousness of the new Islamic regime. His cruelty was that of the peasant boy to whom the killing of farm animals meant nothing, and that of other human beings conveyed little more. Led on by his cleric elders and fellow guards, he had not thought to question the conditions in which Jonathan Blake and Eva Olsen were held. Or the humiliations to which they had been periodically subjected. He saw himself in the forefront of a crusade to purge his country of internal and foreign parasites. Until he had been given the orders from Teheran to prepare the prisoners for 'intensive interrogation prior to execution' it had never crossed his mind that he might be debasing human dignity. Now he watched the girl through the peephole in the steel door to the bare basement cell as she paced up and down like a frightened caged animal. He compared her proud defiance of those early days of her arrest with her twitchy nervousness now.

Iraj knew that neither she nor her boyfriend had actually suffered physical torture. Even the mock execution at Ghasr had been purely psychological, and all other pressures had taken the form of threats and deprivation. He knew for a fact that his fellow countrymen had suffered worse. Foreign nationals, although they might not think so at the time, were treated with leniency.

But this new order changed all that. He had seen enough of the new regime to know that now the gloves were coming off. He knew that the mansion's doctor might have his work cut out keeping the couple alive until the execution at dawn. The list of ingenious torture apparatus he had been told to prepare turned his stomach. Most of it had been used before by SAVAK, and he wondered why the new regime, which was supposed to do away with all the torture and internment, need apply such fearsome techniques themselves?

He turned the key in the lock and heaved open the door. The girl looked round. Her eyes, sunken with fatigue, were suddenly bright with fear.

"It's all right, Miss Olsen." He tried to smile reassuringly.

She relaxed at the sight of the friendly face. "I t'ought it was Colonel Murad."

Iraj tried not to let her see him watching the slender body

that the patched and tattered clothes did little to hide. "He be here soon, but not yet. You cold?"

She hugged her arms and nodded. "It's freezin' in 'ere. Please, what iss time?"

"Nearly two o'clock."

"My God," she breathed. "Can't I wait in my cell? At least I 'af blankets."

Triumphantly he held up a tatty bundle of hairy mildewed material. "See, I bring for you! But you cannot go back. The colonel insist you are waiting when he comes. If I disobey . . ." He did a cutting gesture across his throat.

She took the blankets gratefully.

"Your hair grow." He smiled at her. "Look nice again, soon."

She almost wanted to laugh. "T'ank you."

"I make you tea. Warm you up inside. Quick before he comes. He is late already."

This time the smile came. "T'at really would be nice. You iss kind." She reached out and put a hand on his arm without thinking. He jumped back as though scalded.

"I'm sorry," she said, then suddenly thought how ridiculous it was that she should be apologising to him.

He, too, seemed to realise suddenly that the object of all his secret desires over the past weeks had actually *touched* him. He almost swooned, and stood grinning stupidly.

Then the lights went out.

Iraj laughed. "Electricity no good before Revolution, and no good now. Still we get the failures. The Imam doesn't like electrics."

Eva smiled. "Per'aps 'e is as wise as t'ey say."

The guard nodded. "I go now. Brew up your tea."

Happy for himself, but still concerned at what the future held for his beautiful Norwegian prisoner, he closed and locked the door.

Suddenly the searchlight on the mansion wall, which had been playing along the river bank, flickered and died. Cries of dismay in Persian drifted through the still air, followed by

curses as someone stumbled. Far in the distance, Forbes' trained ear picked up the sound he had been waiting for: the dull thud of explosive.

Around them the twinkling lights of Isfahan faltered for a moment before the entire city was swallowed up by the black velvet night.

Hawksby's voice in the earpiece of the Pocketfone was decisive. "*Go!*"

"Roger," replied Forbes and tapped the Australian on the shoulder. "Move it!"

Together they slid into the darkened undergrowth like menacing black snakes. They moved surprisingly fast across the open expanse of embankment which was now bathed only in a gentle, eerie starglow. There were no tell-tale reflections on the kit of the two men as they continued their deliberate writhing motion through the long grass to the edge of the poplars. Hands and faces were thoroughly blackened, and all bright surfaces had been cautiously wrapped in matt black insulation tape or had been deliberately dulled with dirt. Nor was there any sound from the equipment which had been carefully hooked and attached around their bodies so that metal did not touch metal.

In the few short minutes it took to reach the lee of the twelve foot wall, both men were wringing with sweat from the exertion and the mounting tension as pounding hearts sent blood coursing through their veins.

Without a word Forbes slid the Uzi from his shoulder and, dropping to one knee, trained its long silenced snout on the section of wall where the guards had their observation platform, some forty feet to their right. Using the special L-clip, he had joined two 32-round magazines together, giving the weapon an oddly unbalanced look. But it gave him a devastating and prolonged blast of 9 mm firepower without the need to reload.

A mumble of complaining voices in Farsi came from the other side of the wall. Forbes strained to hear. Damn.

He held up his left hand with three fingers extended. Kangers wrinkled his nose in disgust. The sergeant gave him a thumbs-up, and they began the routine they had practised

endlessly at a specially-built replica of the wall back at Hereford.

There were to be no 'James Bond' gadgets like extendable ladders or one-man helicopters. A twelve foot wall was easy to take in the time-honoured SAS fashion. Back against the wall, with knees bent, Forbes cupped his hands to take Kangers' weight as the Australian used him as a human ladder.

As the sergeant straightened up, Kangers was able to peer through the spiral of modern barbed razor-wire along the top of the wall.

Warfare, he mused, was definitely becoming more spiteful.

A few yards away he could see the outline of the wooden observation platform and the shapes of the three guards smoking and chatting beneath it. No one actually faced him: two had their backs in his direction, and the third was at an oblique angle.

He reached down a hand to snatch the padded combat jacket that Forbes passed up to him. With a quick flick of the wrist he threw it over the wire. He had already decided against cutting it. If the clipping sound hadn't alerted the guards, then the wanging spring of uncoiling razor-wire certainly would.

Instead Kangers threw himself smoothly over the jacket until he sat astride the wall. In one practised movement he unswung the Uzi from his shoulder and lined up the pip on the gunsight.

One of the guards, who had his back to the intruder, began to laugh and glance around the grounds. He shifted his position. That blocked the direct line of sight to the one man who was actually holding his carbine so that it could be quickly brought to bear.

"Come'n, my Islamic beauty," Kangers muttered under his breath. "Jesus wants you for a sunbeam."

The laughing man stepped back.

Phut! Phut! Phut! Phut!

Death slammed viciously and silently out of the night in three seconds of bewilderment and brief, lethal pain. Distributed in the SAS style of two shots per target. To be sure.

Phut! Phut! By the time the third man had hit the ground, Kangers was already pegging the razor wire so that it wouldn't unravel when the steel jaws of the cutters bit through it. Just two brief snaps and he was able to drop a length of the wicked stuff safely into a thick bed of vegetation.

Forbes had already threaded together four toggle ropes. Each six-foot length had a loop at one end of a four-inch wooden toggle at the other. Locked into each other, it gave a four-man Sabre team an instant twenty-four-feet scaling rope.

The sergeant tossed it up to Kangers and began his ascent. Within thirty seconds both men were in the mansion gardens – the guards eliminated and an escape route secured.

The Australian pointed to the inky silhouette of the building which grew out of the trees a hundred yards away. The cut-out shape of the flat roof, with its tall chimneys at either end of the central raised skylight section, were quite distinct. So was the outline figure of the patrolling guard who appeared to be hugging himself for warmth against the chill night.

"I could do a long-shot?" Kangers offered.

Forbes shook his head. He didn't want a dead body dropping to one knee, trained its long silenced snout on the outside the front door.

"Stay on station," he said briskly, "and negotiate anyone who gets too close until we're on the way out."

Kangers Webster nodded his understanding and then, waiting until the sergeant had disappeared towards the rear of the mansion, settled down to hold the snatch team's exit route.

The revolutionary guard on the roof was cold and he was hungry. Before Khomeini's return from exile he had been a professional soldier, but he had been one of the first to desert.. Now his expertise was valued by the new regime and Colonel Murad in particular. He had been pleased to be assigned to these special duties, guarding the highly-prized foreign prisoners kept in the cellars. He would have preferred to be looking after the American hostages, some of whom were in

another house not far away in Isfahan. There was more prestige attached to guarding them, especially as everyone thought the Americans might try another rescue attempt. No one seemed interested in the two foreigners below. No one, that was, except Murad.

The ex-soldier blew into his cupped hands. He really should have put on the extra jersey. He stamped his feet gently on the parapet and looked down into the darkened garden.

A dew drop formed on the end of his nose and he sniffed it back up into his nostrils. Funny, he thought, why hadn't those on the back wall turned on their torches. It looked like this was going to be one of the longer power cuts that they seemed to suffer so frequently, since the recently-built steel works had begun overloading the grid.

He looked up at the stars and, as he did so, forty feet below him a black shadow passed silently across the gravel path to the base of the drainage pipe at the side of the mansion.

In the shadow of the tall chimney stack, the SAS sergeant was aware that, like their civilian counterparts, soldiers behind the front-line never *really* thought that they were in immediate danger from the enemy. It was just an extension of the old 'It could never happen to me' syndrome. By the slack way the man was standing, Forbes also knew that he was tired and lacked concentration. Reaching forward, he eased a tiny pebble from the deep tread of his jump boot and tossed it towards the other chimney stack.

The picket looked across lazily to where he heard the scratching sound. A mouse? On the roof? A bird more likely . . .

That was the last thought he ever had.

There are three ways to kill a man quickly with a knife. Between the fifth and sixth ribs with a rapid up-and-twist motion to destroy the heart. But the blade can get jammed by muscle contraction. Another is to insert the blade below the left ear. Forbes went for the third option.

The powerful left forearm of the sergeant swung around the side of the guard's head and snapped close over his mouth like a steel vice. The man convulsed as he tried to cough up

into the material that smothered him. His eyes nearly bulged out of their sockets as he saw the honed matt blade of the knife sweep up towards him. But he felt nothing as its scalpel point slid into the soft flesh under his chin and up into his brain. Nothing.

"One to Dragon Leader. In position. Over."

Sitting in the dirty green Peykan, which they had stolen forty-five minutes earlier, and was now parked in a side road opposite the villa, Hawksby smiled with grim satisfaction.

In the driver's seat beside him, Tiger was still watching the tall oak gates set in the high wall. There were no pickets outside, and the only sign of life was a solitary flickering light on a third-floor window.

Hawksby spoke into the mike clipped to the collar of his mullah's robe. "Someone's got a lamp on at the front. Can you see it? Over."

"Yes, I've had a look from the balcony. It's a radio room. They've got a hurricane lamp going. Leads run out to an aerial up here on the roof. Over."

Hawksby thought for a moment. There had been two advantages to be gained by knocking out the power. Obviously the opportunities for surprise were greatly enhanced, but it also meant that, prior to the attack at least, their opponents would have to use torches or lanterns to see their way around the building. As the SAS team had no way of knowing the internal layout of the place, or where the prisoner was held, the presence of lights enabled them to pinpoint areas of likely resistance.

He felt sure that for security Blake would be held on either the top floor or in the basement. Assuming that there would be a guard on duty at all times, it was likely he would want a light, even if the prisoner was kept in darkness. As the only light visible came from a communications centre, Hawksby felt fairly confident that they would find their prize in the basement.

"Proceed as planned, Dave. I think we'll probably find our hero below street level, so work your way down. But keep

your eyes peeled, because there's no guarantee he's there . . . Dragon Two?"

"*Yes, boss?*" Kangers' voice crackled onto the network.

"Advance to the back door now, and keep the garden sealed off 'til we get through."

"*Okay boss.*"

"Dragon One." Hawksby said quickly. "Put that radio off the air will you, there's a good chap? Okay, let's go. Out."

Forbes smiled to himself. It would be a pleasure.

He picked up the twelve-inch Schermuley Para-Ilum flare from where he had placed it beside the one chimney that smoked. Next to it he placed a No. 83 smoke grenade that would ensure confusion by rapidly providing a seething and impenetrable blue fog.

Holding the tube of the flare over the stack, he yanked the pull-loop. There came a sudden *a'hoosh* of explosive as the illumination flare rocketed down the chimney in a backlash of flame and sparks. Imagining the scene of chaos below as the Schermuley zoomed out of the fire and around the room below, Forbes tossed in the No. 83, then quickly made his way to the front of the building. Standing above the window to the radio room, he extracted his knife again and sliced through the cable to the roof aerial.

Colonel Murad was late. And he was furious. Tonight of all nights his personal helicopter had developed a fault, and it had taken the mechanics hours to fix. If only he had known, it would have been quicker to have gone by car to Isfahan from the outset.

That stupid mullah who had recently been put in charge of the military airbase had refused point-blank to allow him to use one of theirs, because he was worried about his pilots crashing in the dark! Agitated, he strummed a tattoo on the perspex canopy of the helicopter as it approached the airport of Isfahan.

Next to him the pilot looked agitated. Beads of perspiration began to break out on his forehead.

"WHAT IS IT?" the colonel demanded above the clatter of the rotors.

"CAN'T FIND THE CITY! OR THE AIRPORT!" his voice verged on panic. "I THINK I'M LOST!"

Murad shook his head in disbelief.

Then, two thousand feet below, the emergency generator went into action and the lights of the runway and terminal buildings flickered on.

"PILOT, JUST GET THIS THING DOWN BEFORE I LOSE MY TEMPER!"

Part Two

OUT

CHAPTER NINE

ISFAHAN: 0200 hrs, Friday 19th September

Pandemonium broke loose within the villa.

"FIRE! FIRE!"

Ali looked up. He had just finished strapping Blake's wrists to the wooden arms of the upright chair which stood beside a long table strewn with interrogation apparatus.

Someone was banging wildly on the steel door. Quickly he picked up the hurricane lamp, crossed the concrete floor, and peered out through the spy-hole.

"Who's there? What's happening?"

He could hear people rushing around and colliding in the pitch black corridor that led up to the hall. Voices were raised in alarm.

Again someone shouted: "FIRE!"

Ali sniffed. Yes, he could smell smoke, too.

"Hey!" he cried. "Let me out!" He didn't intend to burn in hell or on earth, and certainly not trapped behind a locked steel door with a traitor. He shouted again, and this time the revolutionary guard who held the keys heard him.

"Let me out! What's happening?" Ali screamed.

The key turned and the door swung open. "There's a fire. It started in the kitchen. Apparently the tea vat on the stove just exploded!" Feeling more relaxed now that the door was opened, he laughed. "What's the cook put in it? Weedkiller and sugar. It tastes like it!"

The other man failed to see the funny side. "That's what he said. They're trying to stop the blaze spreading from the kitchen." More smoke began to tumble down the steps. "Hey, can I borrow your lamp? I can't see a thing out here with the lights off."

Ali was offended. "Certainly not. I'm looking after the prisoner."

A brass bell began to jangle fiercely at the top of the basement steps. The two men exchanged glances.

"Someone at the gate," Ali said. "It must be Colonel Murad. He'll be furious. The cook had better watch out!"

The guard grimaced and stumbled towards the steps, bumping into two more guards who were racing across the hall to the doors. The billowing smoke was thickening more than ever.

"Quick, get them open!" he shouted, "and let this smoke out. And for the sake of Allah find some more torches!"

The guard followed the others out through the doors, emerging on the front steps amid a mushrooming cloud of sickly smoke. His eyes streaming, he unshouldered his G3 as he ran down the path. Quickly he unbolted the gate and released the chains.

The hawk-nosed mullah looked imposing as the smoke wafted through the newly-opened hole in the wall and tumbled into the avenue.

"Colonel Murad?" the bewildered guard asked, trying to peer over the religious man's shoulder.

"Yes," Hawksby said gruffly. Whoever 'Murad' was, he was evidently expected and the opportunity was too good to miss.

The guard looked unsure, but Hawksby waved his gun aside with an elegant, commanding wave. Behind him Tiger looked sullen and arrogant in his spotless revolutionary guard's outfit.

"There are only two of you?" The guard looked out at the smoke now swirling in eddies around the trees in the avenue. "Hey, *agha*!"

He caught Hawksby by the sleeve. "Where's Colonel Murad?"

Hawksby brushed off his hand with an air of disdain. "He's coming. But it looks as though you have problems here. Quick! Lock the gate behind me! We don't want our prisoner escaping under cover of all this smoke!"

The guard looked surprised and ordered his two col-

leagues to secure the front entrance. "*Agha*, you know about the prisoner?"

"Of course," Hawksby answered imperiously.

"But I do not know *you*. I have never seen you before!"

Hawksby stared absently up at the gaping front door from which smoke continued to tumble. "Do you know our beloved Imam? Or our leader Beheshti?"

The man didn't know how to treat this authoritarian mullah. "You don't look like Beheshti," he ventured.

"Of course not," Hawksby replied. "I don't look like him because I am . . . his brother."

"Oh!" The man's mouth gaped and his eyes were wide with awe.

"Now we must take care that our important prisoner does not fry to death! Where is he?" Hawksby demanded, striding purposefully towards the steps.

"In the cellar, *agha*."

Hawksby said: "Fool! We shall put him in the rear garden. There he will not suffocate to death and he will be quite secure." He smiled sweetly at the perturbed guard. "Unless he is a monkey, eh?" The major paused. "Now, go and supervise the putting out of the fire, while I see to the prisoner."

Hesitating only for a moment, the man scurried off towards the kitchen, feeling thoroughly intimidated.

Harnessed to the chair in the cellar, Jonathan Blake was filled with black despair. The sense of foreboding had been gnawing at him since late afternoon when he had been informed that Colonel Murad was coming to conduct further interrogation. He realised by the tone of Ali's voice that the pressure was on. The screw was being turned. The guard gave no indication why, and indeed, Blake doubted if a peasant militant in such a lowly position would have been told anyway.

The journalist reasoned that he had been forewarned of the coming event so that he would have time to consider the consequences of his refusal to co-operate. It was like a prolonged wait outside a dentist's surgery with the sound of

the drill whirring next door. His nerves felt frayed.

For some time now he had thought that he had got away with revealing only a limited knowledge of the Mulcruf Foundation, but nothing about its true significance. He had gambled that the Iranians would not really want to torture Eva, as they had threatened. Although he had heard many stories of nationals receiving such treatment under the mullahs, by all accounts they trod more cautiously with foreigners. Mock executions had been the vilest form of mental strain that had been used, he gathered, and victims of these had included some of the American hostages.

Evidently Murad wanted more now, and Blake knew that this time the silver-tongued interrogator would carry out his threat. If he was right, then he and Eva faced a new dilemma. To reveal all they knew might save them from the infliction of further pain, but it would also mean a certain death penalty. No one in Iran could know what he and Eva knew and be allowed to live.

He had spent the long hours of the night cursing Sabs Karemi's nocturnal visit and trying to work out a solution to his problem. But it was impossible unless he knew Eva's views. His brain felt as thought it was stuffed with cotton-wool, dulled and useless, paralysed with blind panic. And now, on top of everything, the fire. The guards seemed to be running around in chaos. Voices were raised in hectic frenzy as everyone shouted orders to everyone else. And no one seemed to be doing anything. Total bedlam.

It was then that he decided. As the smoke was getting worse, Ali would have to unshackle him from the chair. The cellar door was wide open. Outside the lights were out and everyone seemed confused. It was an ideal opportunity.

He looked at Ali's back. He was squinting into the corridor, his G3 slung carelessly over his shoulder. Could he overpower Ali? Blake was uncertain. The last time he had fought had been when he was eleven years old. It had been a playground battle over a myopic girl in pigtails. He had lost.

"Hey!" he called out on impulse. "I'm choking! Can't we get out of here until the fire's out?" He feigned a violent fit of coughing. Ali glanced back at the prisoner and considered.

The smoke was getting thicker, he was sure, but then if Murad had just arrived upstairs there could be hell to pay if Blake wasn't in his cell.

"You stay!" he called out.

He turned back to the corridor at the sound of heavy footsteps. A tall mullah emerged from the rolling clouds of smoke. He was followed by a squat, mean-looking revolutionary guard with slanted eyes that gave him a slightly Oriental appearance.

"Where's Blake?" the mullah demanded.

Ali was taken aback. He didn't know this man.

"Here," he replied without thinking. "Why, who wants to know?"

Hawksby ignored the question. "He is to be taken into the garden for safe-keeping. Otherwise he'll choke to death."

"On whose orders?" Ali was not sure. "Colonel Murad's?"

That name again. "Who else?" Hawksby replied aloofly, implying that the guard was a fool to think otherwise.

"I'll bring him," Ali replied. After all, it did seem a sensible thing to do. Blake would have to be a pole-vaulter to scale that wall.

"No," Hawksby answered quickly. "*We* will take him."

Again Ali looked uncertain. Then he shrugged and crossed to Blake, stooping to undo the arm straps and then the manacles that fastened his ankles to the chair legs.

No one had expected what came next. Summoning his courage and determination, Blake swung his feet upwards, catching Ali under the chin. The ferocity of it propelled him across the room in a half-somersault. Stunned for a moment, Ali lay on the floor. Then, seeing Blake leap from his chair, he reached for the G3 that had fallen by his side. For a man who had just been badly shaken his reactions were fast. He had the barrel trained before the journalist reached him.

But Ali wasn't fast enough. Flame spat silently from Tiger's unshouldered Uzi in a deadly one-second burst. Blake fell onto the Iranian with his hands about the man's throat.

Something warm and sticky pulsed through Blake's

fingers and he opened his eyes to see that Ali's face had gone. The 9 mm rounds had taken off his flesh like a bacon slicer, leaving behind an unrecognisable pulp of bone and red meat.

Hawksby hauled Blake from the dead guard. "Calm down, Jonathan. We're friends."

The sudden sound of the modulated English voice stunned Blake. He gaped up at the grinning bearded face in amazement.

"We'll have you out of here in a jiffy," the major continued. "Just play it cool and come along with us as though you are still a prisoner. Now turn around and put your hands behind your back." Roughly he spun the journalist and threaded some cord between his wrists. "This isn't tied, it's just for effect. We're going to take you through to the back garden. Should anything happen to us, or we get separated, make your own way if you can. One of our men is there and he'll see you're all right. Got that?"

Blake's mouth still hung open as he tried to comprehend the rapid burst of curt instructions. "You're British?"

Hawksby smiled reassuringly. "How d'ya, guess, old chap? Now shut up and come with us."

Blake resisted. "What about Eva?"

"Who?"

"Eva, my girlfriend. She's a press photographer. Eva Olsen. She's a prisoner here, too."

Hawksby was adamant. "No way, Jonathan. We've only planned on you. Now get weaving."

"NO!" Blake pulled away. "I'm not going without her."

"Look," Hawksby snapped, "you can come with us willingly or we'll carry you out unconscious. The choice is yours."

"You don't understand! She's got the film!"

"What film?"

Blake shook his head in despair. "*Please*! She *must* come. I can't explain . . ."

Hawksby hesitated.

Tiger, who had been keeping watch on the door, said: "You want me to get her, boss?"

Hawksby thought for a moment. "No, I'll go. Where is she?"

Blake inclined his head towards the corridor. "Two doors down."

Hawksby turned to Tiger. "Shut this door, and stay here until I get back."

The Gurkha nodded. "Better hurry, boss, this smoke thinning out. They must be gettin' fire under control."

Hawksby disappeared into the passage.

The major found the door to Eva's cell without difficulty. It was ajar and he peered in cautiously to see the unshaven, blue-chinned guard seated on an upturned orange box in the light of an oil lamp. He was drinking tea and talking to the girl. Hawksby was immediately struck by her beauty, particularly her bright violet eyes, despite the ragged blonde haircut and the old blankets she had around her.

She looked up as he entered, and the guard twisted around on his seat.

"Don't you know there is a fire?" Hawksby demanded in Farsi.

Iraj wasn't sure whether to challenge this stranger. "Someone said it's nearly out."

"Huh!" Hawksby retorted. "That's how much you know! This ceiling is about to collapse. I am taking this girl out the back to the garden."

Iraj misunderstood. He automatically assumed that the mullah meant that the prisoners were to go before a firing-squad. Several had been shot in the garden and buried in a quiet corner.

He climbed to his feet, deciding rashly that he wasn't going to let anything happen to this girl. It didn't occur to him that, over the weeks she had been his helpless captive, he might have become just a little infatuated with her.

"On whose orders?"

Hawksby used the name that seemed to impress everyone in the villa. "Murad."

Slowly the guard shook his head, as though making a difficult decision. He swung the G3 up into the firing position. "No, I will not permit it . . ."

The mullah's belly suddenly seemed to rip apart, the front of his robe bursting into blackened holes, as Hawksby

squeezed the trigger of the concealed Uzi.

Eva gazed in amazement as the force slammed Iraj back against the wall. His spine hit the brickwork first, hard, so that his head jerked back sharply. There was an audible crack as his skull made contact with the hard surface. He slid slowly down the wall until he sat on the floor, his head slumped forward and his mouth slack, like a caricature of a sleeping man. Blood pumped from the sodden patch on his shirt.

Eva Olsen was horrified. Who was this ogre from whom even Iraj had tried to protect her?

"I've come to help you," Hawksby said quickly, reaching forward to take her arm.

She stepped back, her eyes wide with alarm. "What do you want with me?"

Hawksby frowned. "Norwegian?" He recognised the accent from the many times he had taken part in joint NATO exercises to reinforce the northern flank.

"Yes." Her voice was hoarse. "You iss English?"

He tried to be reassuring. "I'm not a mullah, I've come to get Blake out of here and you, too. Please don't hesitate, because we don't have much time before that fire is out."

"You start it?" Incredulous.

"A diversion."

"You'ss a secret agent?" Saying it like that made it seem like a joke. "A commando?"

"Sort of," Hawksby returned vaguely. "Now, *please*!"

She nodded. "But wait a moment." Turning, the girl rushed to a corner of the cell and, stooping down, eased a loose brick from the wall. She reached into the hole and pulled something out.

"Please, you can take it?" she said. "I 'af nowhere to keep it."

He accepted the small film cassette. Minox, he guessed. It was then that he realised that her filthy stained drill shirt and skirt were hanging in shreds beneath the blanket. "I can see your problem," he said, trying to avert his eyes.

Putting cord around her wrists, too, Hawksby pushed Eva into the passage, locked the door, and moved along to Blake's

cell. To his double-knock Tiger opened it and ushered out the journalist. The smoke was now disappearing at an alarming rate and Hawksby led the party up the steps to the hall.

Forbes was waiting. He seemed to have four revolutionary guards under his command, rushing to fetch fire buckets as he bellowed instructions in Farsi. Hawksby couldn't resist a smile. It seemed that the qualities of an NCO were the same the world over.

"Slow it down," the major hissed at Forbes as they passed on their way to the back of the mansion, "the damn fire's nearly out!"

Once at the rear door, Hawksby swung it gently open to enable Kangers Webster to identify them. A sharp whistling note came from nearby shrubbery and the major saw the lean Australian emerge from the shadows. The Uzi waved them on urgently.

"Who *are* you people?" Blake murmured, not really expecting an answer.

Christ, they've taken their time, thought Kangers. But all he said was: "Straight down this gravel path, boss. Turn right at the wall. About ten metres along."

Hawksby guided the group forward, down between the fragrant flowering shrubs, past the three dead guards by the observation platform, and under the wall until they came to the scaling ladder.

Tiger sprang up it like a monkey, checked the other side, then leapt out of sight. Blake followed, swinging clumsily despite Hawksby's efforts to keep the ropes steady.

Kangers joined them as Eva began her ascent, making a better job of it than the journalist. The Australian glimpsed the exposed buttocks as she swung over the top of the wall.

He exchanged glances with Hawksby and a grin cracked his face. "Guess this job has it's compensations."

"Get over, you randy sod, and take them down to the crossing."

At the riverside, the weighted crossing rope was hauled taut and secured around the Australian's waist. Tiger went first to secure the opposite bank, then Blake was given a black flotation bag and clipped to the free-running shackle pulley.

Quickly he waded into the shallow water until he reached the deeper centre channel. There the current began to carry him downstream and across to the other side. Eva went next, followed by Hawksby.

Still outside the garden wall, Kangers glanced impatiently at the luminous dial of his watch. Where in the hell was Forbes?

Sergeant Dave Forbes was beginning to enjoy his role. He had never seen such a slovenly group of militiamen, and they seemed to be terrified at their first real taste of discipline. In their panic to obey this tyrannical Iranian NCO, who seemed to have sprung from nowhere, they were falling over themselves – sometimes literally – and shouting orders to each other. It all lent to the scene of uproar.

"But, *agha*," one diminutive student guard protested, "the fire is out now!"

"Nonsense!" Forbes bawled in Farsi. "Smouldering timbers can set the whole thing off again."

But, as the palls of smoke subsided, some sense of order was returning and the sergeant noticed that some of the more senior guards were starting to regain their composure and talk earnestly amongst themselves. Time for you to say your goodbyes, he thought to himself, and began backing surreptitiously towards the garden door.

One of the senior guards pointed to him. "Hey, you, I thought you said you were with Colonel Murad? I haven't seen him."

Forbes shrugged. "He was around. I expect he is upstairs somewhere."

"And what about the prisoners? Someone says your friend, the mullah, took them into the garden. Is that right?"

Forbes shook his head. "No, they took them out the front. Taking them back to Teheran."

Immediately he realised his stupid mistake. While he was so busy trying to confuse his enemy, he had confused himself. Iranians shake their heads for 'yes' and nod when they mean 'no'.

He heard the distinctive rasp of a cocking handle behind

him. Turning his head just a fraction, he glimpsed an intelligent-looking guard with a G3 pointed at the small of his back.

"I do not trust this stranger. Take his weapons, but do not get too close. I think he is dangerous." The man called to the others who were also lifting their weapons into the firing position. "Quick, go and check the garden. I heard the mullah saying they should take the prisoners there."

Christ, thought Kangers, the Hawk will kill me! He was angry with himself for his own indecision. Forbes was now five minutes behind the others, and yet he could not bring himself to cross the river and leave the sergeant to his own devices.

It was then he heard cries and shouts drifting through the still air from the wall. He could wait no longer. Grabbing the last flotation bag, which had been filled with all the left-over gear, he splashed into the chill water.

Simultaneously he heard the rifle crack and felt the stinging pain in his right arm. The shock of it on his nervous system made him drop the bag in a reflex reaction. Cursing, he stumbled farther into the water. More shots rang into the darkness and he saw tell-tale splashes around him.

Already the muscles in his right arm were beginning to numb and he knew he must be bleeding badly. He threw himself at the crossing rope, grabbing it fiercely with his left hand. Almost immediately he felt it being tugged in strong repetitive jerks. He knew instinctively that it must be Hawksby and Tiger hauling him across from the opposite bank.

His vision was starting to blur. He gritted his teeth and tried to focus on his left hand. As he willed his concentration, his white strained fingers became an immovable steel claw in his mind. Even as they pulled him out on the other bank, his left hand still held a desperate grip on the rope. It was almost like a dead man's grip.

The helicopter carrying Colonel Murad landed heavily, fracturing one of the skis. However, he was not angry. He had

been anticipating such a disaster and was just pleased to have got away with his life.

Bowing his head to avoid the slowing blades, he quickly left the pilot to worry about how to get the thing repaired.

Outside the terminal building a guard waited to chauffeur the colonel to the villa on the north bank of the Zayandeh. The man had gone to great trouble to impress his superior: freshly-laundered and pressed uniform and a field jacket he kept exclusively for his driving duties.

So he was greatly irritated when the colonel didn't even seem to notice him. In fact the SAVAMA officer only spoke once, when he asked about the lack of lights in Isfahan.

"Another power-cut I am afraid, *agha*," the driver replied respectfully.

Colonel Murad just gave an ill-tempered grunt and peered out of the side window at the dark streets flashing by.

Alan Hawksby was stunned by the speed at which everything had started to go wrong. It was bad enough Sergeant Forbes falling behind schedule. Possibly he had been overcome by the enemy, no doubt as a result of his own bull-headedness.

That would be typical of the man. But Kangers Webster's indiscipline in waiting too long for his companion was unforgivable. It was bad enough having to carry the semi-conscious Australian two hundred yards to the waiting Simca truck. But Webster's thoughtless action had cost Hawksby his second helicopter pilot. This was the problem foremost in his mind as he and Tiger thankfully rolled the Australian's deadweight onto the tailboard and hurried Blake and Eva Olsen inside.

Carrying the wounded man had lost them vital minutes. The guards must know that the team was headed south. Although they could not be sure of their quarry's destination, Isfahan Airport would seem a fairly obvious bet. Here, Hawksby's across-river escape route came into its own, providing a natural vehicle barrier. It was helped by the fact that the nearest bridge to the villa was for pedestrians only. By the time the guards reached the next bridge to the east,

Pol-e-Felezzi, the escaping truck should have had a head start. Now that lead might be only a matter of seconds.

Tiger had already substituted the Simca's headlamp bulbs with an infra-red set and, wearing the CUB viewer, Hawksby was able to drive at high speed down the darkened avenues to the airport. They managed to regain a few vital minutes on their planned schedule. By the time the Simca was parked opposite the airport's perimeter fence, Kangers was in less pain. Tiger had used one of the Australian's personal morphine syrettes, which he kept in a pouch around his neck. But he remained too weak to stand without assistance.

Disorientated by the unbelievable and fast turns of events, Blake and Eva followed the three SAS men in dumb obedience. The two prisoners were so stunned at their sudden freedom that they did not yet appreciate the difficulties that the snatch team were now in. Although emergency lighting was now on in the terminal buildings, the perimeter lamps were still out.

As Hawksby quickly stuffed his mullah's robes and turban into his back-pack he spoke to Blake: "I'm afraid, Jonathan, I need to enlist the assistance of you both. Tiger and I will go ahead through the wire. When he signals, I'd like you to help our wounded friend."

Eva glanced at Kangers who was sitting on the ground with his head in his hands, trying to shake off his double vision and feeling of nausea. "Will 'e be all right?"

"He'll survive," Hawksby replied curtly. "But on the first sign of any trouble just leave him and run through the wire in the direction of the helicopter compound. I'll show a small green light to guide you. Got it?"

Eva looked aghast. "Leave 'im, just like t'at?"

"Just like that."

She exchanged glances with Blake and shrugged.

Without waiting further, Hawksby and Tiger slithered across the intervening stretch of scrub to the fence. There the Gurkha kept watch with the cocked Uzi, while the major wielded the wire-cutters. In thirty seconds, a small section was removed and Hawksby wormed his way through. He moved in fast to where the Bell JetRanger would be waiting.

The compound was deserted and he had no difficulty finding the blue machine, although he had to waste valuable minutes locating a replacement igniter plug from another aircraft. Forbes still held the vital piece that had kept their getaway helicopter firmly grounded.

Quickly he switched on the cockpit lights and scanned the instrument panel, desperately trying to remember the brief course he had been on two years earlier. With bated breath, he pressed the starter button and waited for the engine to fire. The starter whirred discordantly. He tried again, 'cracking' the throttle open a fraction. This time there was a dull *whoof* and the great blades began their laborious sweep, gathering momentum at every turn. He fumbled for the signal lamp and flashed it once, briefly, in the direction of the perimeter fence.

Now the wait began. It seemed like an eternity. Scanning the surrounding darkness for signs of life, he laid the Uzi across his lap and flicked off the safety catch. Just in case.

After a few minutes he saw lights outside the terminal building. He squinted. Two of them. Damn! Dipped vehicle headlights. Turning in his seat, he peered behind. Blake and Eva were struggling across the tarmac with Kangers hung awkwardly between them. Obviously the Australian was making an effort but he didn't have the strength to raise his head. Twenty yards behind them, Tiger was walking unhurriedly backwards, cautiously sweeping the darkness with the snout of his sub-machine gun.

Hawksby reached over and pushed open the cockpit door. "For Christ's sake, hurry up! We've got visitors!"

Blake and the girl stumbled forward, bundling the soldier into the rear seat. Hawksby glanced back towards the terminal. The approaching headlamps seemed to burn into his skull. They were scarcely a hundred yards away. Eva fell in behind Kangers and Blake heaved at both of them as he tried to squeeze in. Tiger ran the last few feet. Hawksby twisted the throttle grip on the pitch lever. The finger on the dial crept towards 85. The gyrating blades began speeding to a blur. Above, the engine noise rose to a high-pitched whine.

Tiger leapt at the open door and hit the seat with a thud.

The machine began to tremble like a living thing. Dazzling white light from the nearing headlamps filled the cockpit, blinding Hawksby.

He twisted the throttle grip until the dial indicator passed the red line and prayed. For the life of him he couldn't find the correct speed.

Above the roar he heard the crack of gunshot. Somewhere something pinged against metal. The cockpit trembled again as he shifted the pitch lever so that the tilting angle of the blades would start to bite. Then, with agonising slowness he felt it start to lift.

Sod it! Wrong pitch.

In desperation he snatched at the lever and the helicopter left the tarmac like a rocket on a blast-pad.

Hawksby over-corrected the pitch, so that the gangling giant hoverfly dipped sickeningly. The gathering of guards from the airport jeep ducked instinctively.

The JetRanger seemed to find its height, bouncing comfortably in the air current. Hawksby's mind was a swirl of confusion as he tried to remember what the hell to do next.

"Kangers Webster," he cursed aloud, "I'm going to have your balls for breakfast!"

He eased the control stick away from him, increasing the pitch and rearward thrust. The machine dipped awkwardly as he began to take it forward and into an untidy circuit before breaking off in a southerly direction.

CHAPTER TEN

ISFAHAN: 0245 hrs, Friday 19th September

The revolutionary guards were going to take no chances with their new captive.

Anticipating the wrath of Colonel Murad on his arrival, they had secured Sergeant Dave Forbes in the cell that had previously held Jonathan Blake. To make certain that he stayed there, and wasn't sprung during a return visit by the strange mullah, they tied his hands behind his back and posted two guards on the door.

On the other side of it, Forbes seethed at his own stupidity. His feeling of frustration was aggravated by the fact that the guards refused to come in to silence him, despite his taunts and yells of protest. As the minutes passed he finally had to admit to himself that he had no chance of rejoining the others. He was on his own now.

He sat down on the stark wooden bench and considered his position.

Although there was a contingency plan for anyone who got cut off to make their way to the house of Hameda Gulistani's uncle, where they had first met Curt Swartz Jnr., there was no guarantee that help would be available in that direction for long. For all Forbes knew the American's French cover could already be under suspicion, and the snatch of Blake might just trigger off a wave of suspect arrests.

Therefore he had to move fast, and he was already prepared. Training in the Special Air Service instilled the point that it was invariably better to fight an adversary, however hopeless the struggle, because you never knew how weak he might be. The same principle applied to being held in

captivity. Unless you needed time to recuperate from injury, you were to get out fast.

Behind his back, Forbes worked his hands ceaselessly until he felt the bindings begin to loosen. Each soldier in the regiment had a thorough knowledge of the techniques of muscle control and manipulation that had made a career for men like Houdini. A man who really understood ropes and knots might succeed in keeping an SAS soldier trussed, but he would really have to know his stuff. Hardly surprisingly, the revolutionary guards did not know their's.

Feeling the blood circulating around his hands again, Forbes began to relax. He looked up at the ceiling. That would be his way out, he decided, if he was going to be left for any length of time. It would be the one thing his captors wouldn't expect, yet it would be the easiest. Because it was not a purpose-built prison, the floor was a far weaker, and more flexible structure than the walls. Recalling the layout of the ground floor above he thought that he could gain access to a utility room which had bars fitted to the window. The hacksaw blade stitched into the collar of his field jacket would go through them like a knife through butter. It would then be a matter of using a conveniently placed tree to cross to the outer wall of the mansion. But he somehow expected that his first opportunity to get out would come much sooner. He was right.

Excited voices were heard outside, together with a scurrying of feet, before an unusual quietness fell over the place. Then there were heavy unhurried footfalls on the steps. After a few moments a wary eye peered in through the hole in the steel door. Forbes braced himself and stood up. He walked very slowly forward so as not to alarm anyone who was about to enter. If he waited a second too long, whoever was coming in would have time to have the door locked behind him immediately.

The sergeant deliberately slackened his facial muscles to take on an expression of dejected misery. As the lock turned and two guards stepped in, they were met with a pair of doleful spaniel eyes peering from a bowed head between hunched shoulders.

Pleased to see this arrogant giant so humiliated, one of the guards announced with a sadistic edge to his voice: "Now you see what Colonel Murad does to traitorous dogs."

But the man in the spotless silk suit who followed them in was more professional. Murad was only halfway through the door but he sensed the danger immediately. A desolate broken man cowers in a corner. However miserable he may look, he does not stand waiting for you to enter.

But before Murad could warn the two guards, it was too late. Aware that Murad was trying to back out through the door, Forbes stepped swiftly forward from his flat-footed stance in one fluid movement. His right leg bent upward, his booted foot then straightening out in a flicking kick that made contact with the first guard's knee like a pole-axe. Braced in a rigid position the man's joint shattered like matchwood, and he dropped to the floor with a squeal.

Forbes followed up on the second guard with a left-handed parry to the man's G3 carbine, as his right fist delivered a hard piston-punch to the solar plexus, throwing the man against the door and trapping Murad's right hand as the colonel tried to back out.

Winded, Murad swung his foot upward at Forbes' groin. It was an amateurish straight-legged attempt, which the sergeant countered by sweeping his arm upward, catching the offered leg and yanking it as high as it would go. Murad's back hit the floor with bone-shattering force, his skull cracking against the flagstones. He lay groaning, too dazed to move.

Picking up the dropped G3, Forbes slid through the door and turned the lock. He sped up the stairs to the entrance hall, taking five steps at a time. The guard on the front door gaped in amazement as Forbes emerged, cocking the first round into the breech of his carbine. Before the Iranian had time to unshoulder his own weapon, a two-second burst of 7.62 mm burst into his body and blew open the double doors behind him.

Forbes leapt into the garden from the top step and plunged down the path towards the gate. The single guard on duty, alerted by the gunfire, watched in disbelief as the sergeant levelled his weapon.

Only a forlorn click came as the firing-pin bit at an empty chamber. Forbes swore as he kept on running.

The barrel of the guard's gun dropped, waving from side to side in an effort to follow Forbes' weaving approach. A single shot added to the dying echoes of the previous outburst. Leaves fell over the path like confetti.

Forbes came up under the gun, pushing it aside with his own weapon and jamming the butt of it under the guard's chin, squeezing him back against the locked gate. The sergeant's knee slammed into the man's exposed crotch with eye-watering force. He stepped back to let the crumpled body slide down the gate into a sitting position.

Shouts of alarm came from the villa. In the darkness Forbes could hear orders being shouted and the menacing click of weapons being cocked for action. Quickly he tugged magazines of G3 ammunition from the pocket of the guard's field jacket. There was no time to hunt for more.

He glanced at the confusing tangle of locks, chains and bolts on the gate. Then, taking a rapid step back, he jumped onto the unconscious guard's slumped shoulders. Using the Iranian's head as a launch-pad, he vaulted up to the top of the gate. Ignoring the top edge of spike studs, he heaved himself up and over, and dropped the twelve feet into a deserted Saeb Avenue.

He landed heavily, bruising the bone in his left heel and the pain pulsed through his ankle. Ignoring the throbbing ache he sprinted across the road to where the green Peykan was parked in the side street opposite.

Going to the rear, he plucked the ignition key from the exhaust pipe, unlocked the door and climbed in. It took three turns to get the battered engine firing on at least three cylinders.

He engaged first and hit the accelerator.

It took Forbes half-an-hour to find his way to the bazaar district north of Isfahan's central square. He parked the car and made the rest of the journey on foot down the winding maze of narrow streets that were beginning to stir with life as early-risers prepared for work before the coming dawn. By

the time he reached the unmarked door in the wall, the pain in his heel had become excruciating, and he was hobbling badly.

He fell back against the door with relief and, glancing up and down the dusty lane, knocked three times. Almost immediately the door opened.

"I am weary from travel . . ." he began in Farsi, then realised he had forgotten the agreed code. Stupid bloody idea anyway!

He felt a hand on his arm. There was no mistaking a woman's touch, even in the dark. "Quick, come in."

As soon as the door was bolted behind him, he was immediately aware again of the monastic tranquility of the secluded garden with its tinkling fountain. An oil lamp in the building shed a warm glow over the flowering shrubs; the scent of blossom hung heavily in the air. He breathed deeply on the heady smell. After the tension and violence of the past twenty-four hours, this perfumed garden was a welcome sanctuary from the mad world beyond its walls.

Behind the *chador* Hameda's eyes flashed with concern. "What went wrong?" she asked. "You are hurt?"

Forbes smiled at her and slapped his leg. "Just bruising. I'll tell you . . ." He froze.

Through the archway in the whitewashed room beyond the fountain he could clearly see Curt Swartz Jnr. seated on a cushion. He was in earnest conversation with a young Iranian who looked as though he was still in his teens. Instinctively Forbes raised the G3.

Hameda placed a restraining hand on his. He was aware of the warmth of her touch on his skin. "It is all right, Mr. Dave. That is my brother. He only arrived a few moments before you. You have nothing to fear," she said softly.

Forbes was not so sure. "You said nothing about friends and relatives. Just you and Curt."

Above the mask of the *chador* her eyes looked very beautiful. "Trust me."

Against his better judgment he dropped the G3 to his side. "Is your uncle here too? We could make it a party for the whole damn family."

"No. As I said, he is in Qum on business. He will not return until tomorrow."

"Why's your brother here?"

There was a fear in her eyes. "To warn me that the *Hezballàhi* are looking for me."

Forbes made a quick mental translation. "The Party of God?" He remembered mention of them before they left. "A sort of religious militia?"

"Yes. My brother was a member of them. That is how he heard that they suspect me. They have an order for my arrest. They have already visited my home in Teheran and my brother thinks they will come here in the morning. My mother is a foolish woman. She thought if she told them I was staying here they would be lenient with me."

Jesus, thought Forbes, that's all we need. He glanced up at the lightening sky. Their pretty Iranian accomplice may not have realised it, but the morning was about to announce itself.

They had just sat on a carved stone bench by the fountain when Curt came out of the room, leaving Hameda's brother by himself. Despite his welcoming smile, the American's bearded face was etched with concern. His eyes looked tired.

"Hi, Dave," he greeted. "But I can't say I'm pleased to see you."

"It went all right," Forbes assured. "I'm the only casualty."

Curt looked relieved. "Thank God for that. I somehow thought you guys might pull it off. You looked like a pretty tight team. Small is beautiful on this sort of exercise. How-'dya get left behind?"

"Let's just say I was playing tail-end Charlie. But I'm more concerned with what happens next."

Swartz looked embarrassed. "The plan was to get you out of here via Turkey or Pakistan."

"Was?"

"Well, I guess it still is, but now we've a few problems of our own. Has Hameda told you about Davoud?"

"Her brother?"

"Oh, don't worry, he knows nothing about you or your

operation. He just thinks you're a trusted friend." He indicated the sergeant's olive green uniform. "Although he is puzzled that we have friends in the revolutionary guards."

"I still do not understand why he's come to warn us," Hameda said. "Especially after that attack in the park by his friends."

The American shook his head. "He's young and confused. I reckon he's been carried along with this damn Islam Revolution like the rest of the youths in the country, and saw you as siding with the country's enemies. When he first told the *Hezbellahi* about us, I don't think he thought they'd harm us in any way."

"Jesus Christ!" Forbes was aghast. "You mean that pimply-faced yobbo in there was the one who shopped you?"

Anger flared in Hameda's eyes.

"Steady, Dave," Curt chided. "This detention order for Hameda is from the government. Earlier Davoud had tried to cause some mischief, but this country's in one helluva mess at the moment. It's on the brink of an all-out civil war and family loyalties are divided. But at roots your average Persian wouldn't hurt a fly, let alone a member of his own family. It's these goddamn mullahs who're turning tradition and religion on its head to suit themselves."

Forbes was determined not to get into a philosophical argument. "Look, Curt, we've obviously got to move on from here and quickly. What do you recommend?"

The American scratched thoughtfully at his beard. "Firstly I'll send young Davoud packing, and then we'll make our way by train to Kerman where Hameda has relatives who will help us. We'll be out of harm's way there, at least for a while, and we can complete plans to reach Pakistan. You will go with Hameda for safety's sake, and I will travel alone."

The girl's eyes brightened. "You mean I go to Pakistan too, Curt? Really?"

He grinned at her and squeezed her hand. "I reckon we're just about finished here now, Hameda. Now that you're being harassed, it will only be a matter of time before they're after me. If they aren't already. I'm sure my government won't try another rescue attempt of their hostages, so there's

little point in me remaining." He threw a glance at Forbes. "And now I've a perfect excuse to take you with me."

She looked so happy that he tried not to think how he would eventually tell her about his wife and two children in Minnesota.

"I must say goodbye to Davoud," she said quickly.

"Don't say too much," Curt warned as she rushed inside.

"OPEN UP! GET THIS DOOR OPEN!" The harsh Farsi voice shattered the brittle stillness of the garden as fists thudded on the door in the wall.

Forbes and Curt looked at each other, disbelieving.

"THIS IS THE HEZBALLAHI! OPEN UP! *BIYA*!"

The SAS sergeant swung up the G3, but Curt reached out and put his palm over the breech. "No, Dave. We'll play for time. I'll keep them at bay while you make tracks with Hameda. She'll show you where we've guns hidden. A couple of Ingrams. Take Davoud with you, but leave him as soon as you can."

Forbes smiled. He'd had enough fighting for one day. "Sounds like a good idea, Curt." He handed over the G3 and two magazine clips. "Good luck."

Curt looked back to the door. "If I get caught and interrogated, I'll need to give them a plausible story to keep them away from your team until you've got out of Iran. Can you tell me where the pick-up's being made?"

Forbes felt uncomfortable. There was no way he would trust anyone with such information. It made sense in a way for Curt to be told the truth. Then he could survive any rough treatment by giving information that, whilst not a lie, was not exactly the truth. But Forbes didn't know the American well enough to be able to trust him that far. Even though he had just offered to put his life on the line without a second thought. The sergeant recalled the original Snapdragon plan which had been so hastily revised once Isfahan, and not Teheran, had become the target. "It's a flight in from Turkey, Curt. Low-level just this side of the Sov. border. The RV's at a disused airfield at Bu'in, about seventy miles west of Teheran."

Curt frowned as he checked over the weapon, and expertly

slid in a clip of cartridges. "I know it. We considered it for the 'Figbar' base in our own rescue attempt. But it's a long way from Isfahan."

"They'll make it," Forbes replied curtly.

"I'm sure they will!" The American grinned reassuringly and motioned the sergeant to join Hameda and her brother. "Don't worry. I'll ensure they go huntin' for your friends a million miles from Bu'in."

Forbes shook his hand. "Have fun."

The noise of splitting timber filled the courtyard as Curt crouched down behind the stone bench. He levelled the G3 at the door in the wall. Forbes joined Hameda and the callow-looking youth in the archway to the building.

"Curt's staying?" she asked.

"Yes, he'll follow us as soon as he can."

She looked at him uncertainly. But somehow she felt she could trust this big dark soldier from another country. "There are stairs at the back. We can get out onto the roof and escape over the houses," she said quickly.

"Let's go."

The door finally ruptured to the ugly sound of rending timber. Curt squeezed the trigger gently as the first of the *Haghuleh* burst in through the shattered planks. The gun stammered noisily into action. Bodies fell headlong onto the cobbles. Others stumbled eagerly in behind them to take their place in the carnage.

Curt fired another measured burst in the soft mass of writhing flesh. Blood and entrails splattered onto the pure white walls. A returning shot was fired, a bright muzzle flash in the wreathing clouds of cordite. It was trapped like a mist in the enclosed space. A stray bullet hit the ceramic fountain behind the American. It fractured and shattered into the stone bowl. The delicate sound of water stopped abruptly.

Calmly Curt Swartz Jnr. pressed a fresh clip home into the carbine. The perfumed garden would never be the same again.

The JetRanger skimmed low over the mountain ridge and swept down the far side into the valley set deep in the Zagros range.

"It's nearby," Tiger asserted, concentrating the map-lamp beam on the chart on his lap.

Hawksby leaned forward to get a better view through the canopy. The sterile landscape through which the river bed coiled was bathed in pale starlight. Somewhere ahead, wreathed in mist, a wooded outcrop came steadily nearer.

"That's it," Hawksby said suddenly with a sense of relief. Twisting in his seat, he yelled back to Blake. "HOW'S OUR PILOT?"

The journalist leaned forward to shout his reply above the clattering blades. "HE'S CONSCIOUS, BUT VERY WEAK!"

Hawksby nodded. "PUT THE HEADSET ON HIM, WILL YOU!"

Blake nodded and withdrew.

"That's not it, boss." Tiger tapped the map with his forefinger. "I reckon we go on a bit farther."

Hawksby wasn't going to have his spirits dampened. "C'mon, Tiger, hasn't the regiment taught you anything about navigation? I'm sure this is it."

The Gurkha was emphatic. "*I've* taught the regiment a thing or two, boss. And this isn't it."

"It's how I remember it on the 3-D model they rigged up."

"Similar," Tiger agreed, "but not quite the same."

"*Hi, boss.*" Kangers Webster's voice suddenly came over the headset.

Hawksby, despite himself, was pleased to hear the familiar drawl again. "Thought you'd bought it, Kangers. You sound bright enough."

"*I feel effin' awful. Weak as a bleedin' kitten and I've got a touch of double vision. 'Must've hit my head somehow.*" He glanced around the cramped cockpit. "*Didn't know you could fly, boss.*"

Hawksby couldn't suppress a wry smile. "Oh, I can fly, Kangers, just. But I can't land the bloody thing. You'll have to give instructions."

The Australian chortled. "*I'll do me best, boss, but I'm seein'*

two of everything at the moment, and I'm half asleep."

"So what's new?"

Hawksby eased up as the approaching outcrop took on a more distinguishable shape. "I'm still sure that's it. Tiger."

"Is that the fuel gauge, boss?"

"Huh?" He followed the pointing finger. "I think so. 'Must be. Oh, Christ!"

"What is it?" Kangers asked.

"Out of bloody fuel. There must be a leak."

Tiger peered again at the gauge. "Enough for another five miles, boss?"

Hawksby felt himself starting to panic. "How the hell should I know?" He didn't want to over-ride the Gurkha's legendary sense of navigation, but he was convinced in his own mind that they had reached their destination. "I'm going to take her down!" he announced.

"There's no signal from anyone," Tiger observed calmly.

Hawksby ignored him and slowed some more.

"*Easy on the stick, boss!*" Kangers said. "*And let the pitch lever down at the same time. But slowly!*"

The major obeyed, fumbling over the controls as he tried to co-ordinate his movements.

The helicopter dipped sickeningly and Eva Olsen let out a squeal of surprise.

"Lever up!" Kangers yelled.

Hawksby corrected and the helicopter hovered, but at an awkward tilt.

"What's below?" Kangers asked.

Hawksby peered over his shoulder. "Bare-arsed mountains."

"And bushes," Tiger added helpfully.

"You wanna land?"

"Of course, I bloody do . . ."

"Here, I mean. Is it flat?"

The major was getting impatient. "Just get us down, Webster, for cryin' out loud!"

"*Okay. Just gently lower the lever.*" A frantic note crept into his voice: *"Not so bloody fast . . .!"*

The JetRanger dropped like a stone, then reared suddenly,

as Hawksby over-compensated, grabbing awkwardly at the lever. Then it plummeted again. As the Australian had suspected, the ground was far from flat, but in the eerie starlight it was impossible to see just how steep the slope was.

The first part of the helicopter to hit the ground was one of the hurtling blades. As the rotor embedded itself in the mountainside, what happened next was just a noisy, confused blur.

The rotor and transmission was ripped free of the rest of the fuselage which dropped fifteen feet farther down the slope. There was a violent cacophony of splitting metal and crackling perspex as the front cockpit burst apart like an eggshell. The engine screeched like an express train jamming its wheels on at full speed.

"TURN OFF THE FUEL COCKS!" Kangers yelled.

Stunned, Hawksby tried to find the switch while Tiger used his boots to kick open the jammed port side door.

The rear starboard door had burst open on impact and Blake and Eve were already helping Kangers out onto the rocky slope. Smoke began to stream from the engine cowling. Giving up his search for the fuel cocks, Hawksby dived after Tiger, rolling in a fast, rapid movement across the ground to the shelter of an uprooted boulder.

One of the electrical circuits blew in a shower of tiny sparks and the fuel tank went up with a whooshing roar of bright orange flame.

Hawksby felt the searing heat singe his eyebrows. The air was sucked from his lungs as the mushrooming pyre threw a stark aurora of light over the barren moonscape.

"Reckon you had more fuel that you thought, boss," Tiger observed dryly, and climbed to his feet. "And, by the way, this *is* the wrong ridge."

Hawksby stood up, brushing the dust and flecks of smouldering debris from his field jacket. He glanced across at the other three sheltering on the far side of the raging bonfire. "ANYONE HURT?" he called out.

"Just minor bumps and bruises," Kangers replied. Behind him, Blake and the girl looked pale and shaken. "Where're the lads?"

Hawksby grimaced. "Looks like Tiger was right. This *is* the wrong ridge."

Kangers punched the Gurkha lightly on the shoulder. "What's the Nepalese for smart-arse, Tiger?" He turned back to the major. "Personally, I don't give a monkey's where we are, as long as it's *terra firma*."

Hawksby raised an eyebrow. "You *will* do. I reckon we've got a few hours' walk to reach the others."

Blake approached, extending his hand. "I'm afraid I haven't had a chance to thank you yet."

Hawksby shook it. "I wouldn't thank me yet, Jonathan. This wasn't a scheduled stop and we've a long way to go."

Eva said: "It iss still better t'an being cooped up in t'ose cells. Wondering when we iss going to be tortured."

"Did they?" Hawksby asked. "Hurt you in any way?"

She shook her head. "We wass treated rough sometimes, but not'in' too serious."

"Good. I just hope you're up to a spot of hill-walking. Then we'll get our bush doctor to give you both a check over."

Eva was puzzled. "Bush doctor?"

"Our slang for a medic."

"You iss very organised." She smiled. "But we still do not know your name. Or who you people are. I 'ave 'eard your men call you 'boss'. T'at iss not a military expression, iss it?"

Hawksby laughed. "No, Eva, it's not, but then we're not a very orthodox outfit."

"You say you wass a commando back at t'e 'ouse."

"You said it, Eva," Hawksby corrected, "but that description is close enough. You can both call me Alan. No need to bother with formalities."

"No rank?" Blake asked.

"Still the journalist, Jonathan?" There was a sharp edge to Hawksby's voice. "I am a major in the British Army."

Eva looked impressed.

Blake said: "I'm not great fan of the military, Major, but for once I'm bloody pleased you turned up when you did."

"People usually are, Jonathan." This time there was no mistaking Hawksby's tone. "And I said the name is Alan."

"Yes, *sir*!" Blake mimicked.

"People call him 'The Hawk'," Tiger added brightly.

"Stow it," Hawksby snapped. He glanced at the dying flames of the wreckage that were now licking fitfully over the cockpit upholstery. "Let's get out of here before we get unwelcome visitors."

Above the crackling of the fire no one heard the distant whine of an Iranian Air Force F4 Phantom jet fighter. It was returning to its base at Shiraz after a night exercise.

TEHERAN: 0600 hrs, Friday 19th September

Despite his permanently severe expression, Ayatollah Khomeini was not given to fits of unreasoned anger.

But that morning, at the meeting of the inner caucus of the Revolutionary Council, the old man mercilessly flayed his fellow religious rulers and advisers with a barbed tongue. Vicious Persian rhetoric dripped like pure venom from each carefully selected word in a tirade of abuse and threat. It was directed at all those who had been responsible for the escape of the journalist Blake and the rescuer they had temporarily held.

Standing before the Council, with his head respectfully bowed, Colonel Murad allowed the verbal onslaught to wash over him. He knew that to have allowed the escape of such dangerous prisoners could easily have meant his own execution. However, he also knew that the capture of the American spy called Swartz in Isfahan had been his saving grace. Immediately the news of the *Hezballahi*'s fortunate find had reached him, he had had the prisoner held at the Isfahan mansion and had insisted that Judge Khalkali should take custody.

It had been a shrewd move; the best gift he could give to the mullah who desperately wanted to get his hands on an American, as he had been kept away from the US Embassy hostages. Murad's unexpected offer and co-operation had won the colonel Khalkali's tentative support in the Council. And now Murad needed it. Desperately.

The hook-nosed deputy leader Beheshti was also being subjected to the Imam's taunts and criticisms. He also was in no mood to condemn Colonel Murad. As the man shortly to inherit the leadership of Iran, Beheshti wanted this worrying puzzle fully resolved. And despite these latest upsets, he knew that the SAVAMA officer was the only one professional enough to do it.

At last Khomeini's voice slowed, like a record winding down on an old gramophone. Beheshti used the break to pursue his own line of questioning. "What, Colonel, is your opinion of the people who snatched Blake from Isfahan? Were they Americans?"

"Not necessarily, *agha*," Murad replied, "although the man Swartz was assisting them. They were using Uzi weapons which are Israeli, and the man we caught started speaking Hebrew when we had him in the cell."

Beheshti raised his eyebrows, although he was not altogether surprised. The Israelis had been good friends to the Shah's regime. "So they may have been agents of Mossad? The Israeli Secret Service?"

"Perhaps." Murad was non-committal. "But perhaps it was just a blind. Whoever actually carried out the operation need not be from the country behind it. Motive may tell us more than *prima facie* evidence." He paused, aware it was a dramatic gesture; he hoped not too much so. "I remind you that Blake has dual nationality of British and Swiss. Also there appears to be a strong British connection behind the Mulcruf Foundation."

The Imam seemed to have lost interest; he was looking drawn and weary. However, Beheshti's eyes were bright with curiosity. "This American, Swartz, will be able to confirm if these raiders came from Britain, Colonel?"

Murad inclined his head towards Judge Khalkali. "My good friend the mullah assures me of that, *agha*. And lots more besides. I have no intention of letting Blake out of the country. The helicopter his rescuers took from Isfahan airport had only a limited range, and I believe the American knows its destination. While we have him, we have a chance."

Beheshti's eyes narrowed like a cat's. "And he will tell you?"

Khalkali interrupted. "Even as we speak he is probably pouring out his soul to my men. I assure you he will tell us *all* he knows!" The judge was grinning as he spoke. Beheshti watched his display of enthusiasm with mild irritation, fascinated by the flecks of saliva that gathered at the corners of the man's mouth.

ZAGROS: 0700 hrs, Friday 19th September

The four-hour march had taken its toll.

It had been a tortuous journey along the uneven upper slopes of the valley in the darkness. But at least it had been better than the anxiety created when the rising sun radiated tentative fingers of light over the upper eastern peaks. It was almost as though the sun was deliberately trying to paint the group in stark relief against the barren landscape which offered no hiding place.

The rough ground over which they travelled was predominantly fawn in colour, but at each of the intersecting upper mountain valleys, the hue would change subtly to red or ochre, occasionally broken by a raw white gash of crumbled cliff. Vegetation was sparse and stunted but, way below, the valley walls became greener as they neared the wooded riverbeds. From that height, the lower slopes appeared to have the texture of brushed velvet.

To Hawksby and Tiger the trek had presented no problems. After the Brecon Beacons in Wales during winter, the gentle early morning climate made it seem like a nature ramble. It was a different matter for Kangers Webster, whose usual laconic good humour was noticeably absent as he stumbled after the others.

Blake had fared well for the first hour, but his generally poor state of health, the result of a deficient prison diet, had caught up with him after that.

The girl was in an even worse state as she had no shoes, and had to make do with the improvised sandals that Tiger

had made out of torn strips of clothing with soles cut from the helicopter tyres. Despite his ingenuity, the soft skin of Eva's feet had begun to split after the first twenty minutes. By the end of the journey they were reduced to a blistered and bloody mess. She had finally fallen, exhausted, physically unable to put one foot in front of the other. It was then that Tiger, who seemed to have taken her as his personal charge, manfully lifted her onto his back and marched on steadfastly without slackening his pace.

There was a moment's scare when they were still thirty minutes' walk from the hide. A Land Rover broke cover a hundred yards in front of them. It appeared suddenly out of the wooded upper valley where the rest of Snapdragon was encamped.

For a second Hawksby was taken in by the olive green uniforms of the passengers. The way things had gone wrong in the past twenty-four hours, he could have believed anything. A welcome sense of relief swept over him as he recognised Panther One with Jim Perkis at the wheel.

"Am I glad to see you." It was the passenger, John Belcher, who spoke first as the vehicle slewed to a halt on the loose stones. "We saw the fire on the next ridge, boss, and thought it might be something to do with you. We could only identify it as wreckage of a chopper when daylight came up."

"Corporal McDermid's pulling 'is 'air out," Perkis added chirpily. "Thought you'd all gone up in a puff of smoke."

"We nearly bloody did," Hawksby replied. "You'd better radio him and put him out of his misery."

Belcher quickly surveyed the group. "No serious casualties then . . .?" His voice trailed off. "Where's Dave? He copped it?"

Hawksby's smile dropped. "I don't know. He got left behind."

"Jesus," Perkis murmured. "So he *could* be all right?"

The major seemed suddenly impatient. "Very probably. He can look after himself."

"He'll bloody well 'ave to, I reckon."

"And Kangers' looks none too bright," Belcher observed. "Messy arm wound?" As he climbed out to help the strag-

glers in the group, the medic noticed Eva Olsen for the first time. He had vaguely noticed that there was an unexpected addition to the party, but Eva's short hair and dishevelled appearance had led him to assume she was male.

"Stone me, boss, where'd you pick up that little trophy?"

Hawksby turned. Tiger was helping her the last few steps to the Land Rover. "Apparently she's a friend of Jonathan Blake here. So behave yourself and mind your language."

Folding his arms casually over the wheel, Perkis pushed up the peak of his forage cap and grinned blatantly at the Norwegian. "I reckon she's a pretty fair swap for ol' Forbsy, boss."

The major ignored him, addressing himself to Belcher. "You can stop ogling too, John. Presumably you've been sent to see if we need medical attention, so take a look at Kangers. The young lady's in no imminent danger."

The Butcher smiled. "Right-on, boss, I'll give her my *full* and undivided attention back at the hide."

"I've always wanted to be a doctor," Perkis muttered wistfully.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TEHERAN: 0800 hrs, Friday 19th September

Colonel Murad felt better now.

An hour previously he had left the early morning meeting of the Revolutionary Council feeling distinctly nauseous. It was a combination of twenty-four hours without sleep and an uneasy feeling that he was losing his grip on the situation. Nevertheless he had made the decision to return to his apartment for a shower and some breakfast.

As his chauffeur drove him back to the headquarters building, he lit his first cigarette of the new day and began to marshal his thoughts. Perhaps things weren't so bad after all. The mysterious raiding party had been separated from one of their number, and the guards at the villa had claimed that a second had been wounded. Both factors, he reasoned, could force the raiders to change their plans. Or at least slow them down.

Then there was the timing of the raid. It was all well and good to attack in the early hours of the morning, when the streets were deserted and the enemy half-asleep, but it left little time to get out of the country – especially one the size of Iran – before daylight.

By the time the black Mercedes pulled up outside his office, Murad was convinced that the raiding party would be in hiding until the next night. Then there might be an attempt to fly in a long-range aircraft to pick them up.

That gave him all day to track them down. He had the authority to mobilise the entire Gendarmerie and traffic police network, which still existed – although with no real powers since the Revolution. Then he had the all-powerful, but hopelessly organised revolutionary guards who were

attached to eighty thousand mosques the length and breadth of the country. With these he should be able to set up a check-point on every main road in the country. He would have investigations made in every hamlet, although it would take several days to reach settlements in the more remote regions.

But before he did, he must talk urgently to his team of investigators working on Sabs Karemi's research papers. That *must* come first.

As he took the stairs to his office two at a time, Murad also decided to approach the Army for assistance. There were still the remnants of three corps, based at Teheran, Kermanshah and Shiraz. He would ask the mullahs who now ran the military each to put their best infantry battalion at his disposal to search out the most likely areas for the raiders to be in hiding. They would follow up any leads the country's lethargic police force came up with.

"Good morning, Colonel!" his aide's voice greeted him brightly as he entered his office. "I have copies of all the reports you requested."

Murad grunted as he slipped off his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his tailored white silk shirt. "Anything of interest?"

His aide shrugged. "There doesn't appear to be, but it's hard to say what incidents could be important."

"Let me see," Murad demanded, and moved over to the window as he flicked through the papers. Periodically he grunted as he scanned the error-ridden Telex printouts. "I see Isfahan Airport tracked the stolen helicopter on a south-westerly course, then lost it. Of course, that could be deliberately misleading. Hmmm. No reports of unidentified air traffic from other radar stations. And nothing in the way of interference that could be the result of jamming." He continued through the documents. "I see the Air Force has been busy."

His aide looked concerned. "There has been increasing concern about Iraq. We have stepped up our reconnaissance flights along the border. There are reports of troop and armour concentrations."

"That's no concern of ours," Murad scolded, "but it may mean that the military will be less than willing to spare aircraft for our purposes." In fact, he was certain of it. The Iranian Air Force was in even more of a shambles than the rest of the armed forces. Being better educated, and coming from wealthier families than most others in the military, many pilots had supported the Shah. A lot had discreetly walked out of their airbases and not returned. Of those who were left, hundreds were to fall victim to the mullahs' purges that followed. When the mullahs had taken command, their total ignorance of defence matters became obvious. Confusion degenerated into chaos. In fact, there was one famous incident of a mullah responsible for a major Air Force base who was informed as a matter of course, that Iran was under constant surveillance by US spy satellites. Angered, he immediately ordered the men of his new command to take off and shoot them down. They were still having difficulty in obeying that particular order, the colonel mused.

Suddenly a paragraph in one of the printouts caught his eye. "This fire seen in the Zagros mountains by a pilot from Shiraz?"

His aide shrugged. "A shepherd's fire?"

Murad chewed at his cigarette thoughtfully. "At three in the morning? And clearly visible for five miles?"

"Perhaps it got out of control?" came the helpful reply.

The colonel crossed to the large wall map and, picking up a large wooden chalk compass, drew a circle centred on Isfahan Airport. The distance represented 140 miles, or one hour's flying time for the Bell JetRanger helicopter.

He then worked out the grid reference given in the pilot's report and placed a cross in yellow Chinagraph on the map. The cross failed to intersect the circle by a whisker.

Murad grunted. "It could be significant, I suppose. Get me the officer commanding Third Army Corps at Shiraz. I'll see if they can't fly up some men to the site. It is just possible that it was a guidance beacon for a rescue plane."

The aide raised his eyebrows. "I never thought of that."

"I hope I'm wrong, though, because I'm counting on the fact that someone will attempt to land an aircraft tonight to

pick them up." He glanced at his watch; it was eight-fifteen. "That probably gives us fourteen or fifteen hours to find the rendezvous position."

"What about the American?"

Murad smiled. "He is the only good news to come out of this whole sorry business. By now he'll be at Khalkali's tender mercies in Isfahan. As soon as I've finished here, I shall pay a visit – hopefully before the judge kills the man in his enthusiasm."

"You think he knows details of the plans?"

Murad's eyes narrowed and he studied the tip of his cigarette, blowing on it gently so that it glowed. "Believe me, if he knows, then so shall I before lunchtime."

The room suddenly felt chill to the colonel's aide. He left quickly to phone Third Corps at Shiraz.

Corporal Hamish McDermid was not happy.

As far as he was concerned, orders were orders, and if they included no mention of 'passengers' then there should not be any. Even if they were desirable Nordic blondes. Even worse was the absence of Forbes, a situation aggravated by the Hawk's apparent indifference to his loss.

The Scotsman had served with Hawksby for a year and admired him as a brilliant and often unorthodox soldier. But he had known Dave Forbes since they had been on the same training cadre on joining the Royal Corps of Transport in the mid-1960s. They had shared the same billet, the same enjoyment of a drink and a scrap. And not infrequently the same women. Forbes was a good friend who could be trusted when the chips were down. You could always rely on him being there with his boorish good humour. Ever since those early days, whenever their paths crossed, it was as though they'd never been apart. As far as McDermid was concerned, that was what friendship and the Army were all about.

"Hey, Scottie, what ya reckon on that crumpet the 'Awk's brought back, eh?" It was Perkis who had come across the clearing of the camp after assisting Belcher. "A wee bonnie lassie, eh?"

McDermid scowled. "I'm no sa keen on takin' women on this sorta exercise. Besides, I dunna like her hair. Looks like a bloody lavatory brush."

"C'mon Corp, that's a prison cut, ain't it? What 'ya expect, Vidal Sassoon?"

"She'll bring noot but trouble, Jim, mark ma words." He looked at the diminutive East Ender closely. "I'm more concerned about Big Davy than tha' bit o' skirt. I canna get nothin' from Hawksby on what happened. I ken they didna get on too well, but did Davy do somethin' stupid?"

Perkis shrugged. "According to Tiger, he just didn't turn up before the shootin' started and Kangers got hit."

The Scotsman grunted. "Doesna sound too good, does it, lad? I jest wondered if he'd been a wee bit foolhardy?"

"You know the 'Awk. 'Always bin a bit wary of Dave. They never worked together before, an' their styles are completely different. I mean, Dave's a bit laid-back an' plays it by ear, whereas the 'Awk's more of a planner. An' a stickler for discipline. They was chalk'n' cheese really."

McDermid nodded thoughtfully. "You're right, Jim, but I still canna get over the boss's indifference to losing Davy. I mean, even if he's alive an' free, it's no joke, is it? Stuck in the middle o' bleedin' nowhere wi'out a friend. I've worked wi' the major for a year on Oman and, well, he's a bit insular at the best of times. But never like this."

"Tiger reckons he thinks Dave is over the hill anyway. Past it like. An' 'im gettin' left behind backs up 'is theory. The 'Awk don't like second-raters."

"D'you reckon Davy's a second-rater? Past it?"

"Give over, Scottie." Perkis seemed genuinely hurt at the suggestion. "I first met Dave on me selection march. After that 'e was more of a dad to me than me old man. He looked after me, did Dave. 'E's the best . . ." He sniffed heavily.

McDermid felt the young man's sense of loss. "Let's no get maudlin', lad. Afore y' ken, we'll be weepin' like a coupl'a ol' soaks."

At that moment John Belcher strode across from the canvas stretcher bed where Kangers had fallen into an exhausted sleep.

He was grinning widely as he approached. "Got an errand of mercy for you, Perkis, my old chum. A favour for a lady."

Perkis grinned. "She still takin' a shower in the waterfall? Wants 'er back scrubbed, I suppose?"

"No, Jim, she wants your underpants."

"Eh?"

Belcher slapped him consolingly on the shoulder. "See, she didn't have time to pack when the Hawk bust in, so she's only got what she's standing up in. And after a few weeks in an Iranian prison, they can stand up by themselves."

"You're joking!" Perkis was incredulous.

The bush doctor smiled. "'Fraid not. You're the nearest to her size, so one pair of drawers, olive, if you please." He stood up. "Oh, an' she'll be needing your spare set of fatigues as well as a pair of boots . . ."

"Jesus H . . .!"

As Belcher turned away, the Scots corporal couldn't suppress his laughter. "I warned ye, lad, she'd be noot but trouble . . ."

At that moment a message came over the radio from Corporal Penaia, who had been posted on the rocky outcrop at the top of the ridge. From there, the Fijian had a panoramic view of the river valley, six hundred feet below them.

A voice yelled: "Everyone under cover!"

Perkis sprinted across the glade and snatched up a couple of jerry cans that could have been spotted from the air. Blake, who was sleeping blissfully in the sunlight, was unceremoniously booted awake by McDermid and pushed to the edge of the clearing where the two Land Rovers stood in the shade, draped with camouflage netting.

Woken with a start, Hawksby climbed out of his 'green maggot' sleeping bag. "What's up?" he demanded.

Tiger was still half-listening to the Fijian's sombre voice on the radio headset. "Pogo says chopper just landed, boss. Next to where we crash last night . . ." Hawksby went to speak, but was waved to silence by the Gurkha who was straining to catch the rest of the message. The major kicked impatiently at the tyre of Panther Two. It was never meant to have been like this.

At last Tiger took off his headset. "He says a second chopper dropping troops. Forming wide sweep across the valley . . ."

"What does that mean, Alan?" It was Blake, standing behind him.

Hawksby's eyes flashed with a glint of malevolence so mindful of a bird of prey. "It means that they know it was the helicopter we took from Isfahan last night. And it means they're determined to get you back. They must want you pretty badly."

Fear showed in Blake's eyes. "They do."

Hawksby leaned against the snub-nosed bonnet of Panther Two. "In fact, Jonathan, you seem to be in high demand half-way round the world. Looks like Crazy K and his mob want you as bad as our own people. What's a journalist have to do to be that popular? Most governments would rather see journalists of your sort shot for all the mud they dig up."

Blake gave a wry smile. "Maybe that's why they all want me. So that I can't talk."

Hawksby's lips were formed in a smile, but his blue eyes were hard like ice chips. "*I've* no orders to shoot anyone."

The journalist tried to diffuse the conversation by forcing a laugh that seemed to stick in his throat. "Thank God for that! You're the only friends I've got. And I'm not sure that's going to do me much good."

"Meaning?"

The man shifted uncomfortably. "No offence. It's just that things aren't going too well, are they? What with losing one of your men, and another wounded. Then crashing the chopper." He shrugged helplessly. "And now this . . . I wonder if we'll ever get out."

The major's eyes seemed to focus at some point beyond Blake. "We'll get you out." It was a flat satement that didn't invite contradiction, but as Hawksby turned, he felt as though he had been shot. He told himself it was just wounded pride, but it still hurt just the same. And coming from the two-bit journalist he'd risked his life saving didn't help.

"Oh, Major?" Blake called. Sensing that he'd managed to pierce the armoured reserve of this arrogant and mysterious

rescuer, he felt an overwhelming urge to exploit the situation. "Haven't you been told the reason the British Government wants me out of this country?"

Hawksby turned slowly, determined not to betray his anger. Or his interest. "There's no need, Jonathan. I've no need to know. My orders are just to get you out, and that's what I intend to do."

Blake stared at the major's back as he began making his way up the steep incline to where the Fijian was keeping watch. He was annoyed that the soldier had refused to be baited. It was beginning to rankle that he had been rescued by exactly the sort of people he hated and had spent his professional career trying to expose and condemn. The military was the unacceptable sharp edge of the capitalist society he loathed. And, in that context, he saw the SAS as the finely-honed point. And he had little doubt that 'Major Alan' and his cronies were from the Special Air Service.

Neither did he doubt why the British Government wanted him out of Iran. For the same reason the Ayatollah Khomeini wanted him. They were determined to silence him once and for all.

Thoughtfully he shuffled to the southern edge of the glade, where the trees fell away towards the valley. Below, revolutionary guards were at that moment sweeping the woods.

He was equally determined that neither would succeed.

ISFAHAN: 1300 hrs, Friday 19th September

"AAAaagh!"

Curt Swartz Jnr. told himself that it was not his voice. Nor was it his body spreadeagled naked below him on the wire mesh bedstead. It could not be because, despite his fifty years, his body was in superb condition. It was lean and muscled and lightly bronzed from years of living in the tropics. The body now attached to his head looked pale beneath the single unshaded bulb. It was also ripped and torn and studded with livid weals where someone had attempted to stub out cigars on his skin.

His mind was on a higher plane, fixed to an image of his copper-haired wife Alison, and their two little girls in Minnesota.

It was one of those still mid-summer days when the air itself seemed to bake. He could hear Alison clinking crushed ice into the tall glass of lime by his sun-lounger. A droning bee was about the only thing that moved that fragrant, endless day. Except, of course, for the children. Rushing through the cool spray of the lawn-sprinkler.

He held the picture rigidly in his mind, until the sudden cry of laughter became prolonged and shrill, filled with the sound of pain.

He tried to conjure the picture of Alison again, but this time he couldn't see her eyes. Just the vague outline of her face. And then that, too, began to slip and the sound of a screaming child forced its way through, filling his head.

And then the picture in his mind fractured like delicate porcelain, and the sound of his own pain deafened him.

AAAAAGHH! Not a child's voice, but his own. A reluctant sound wrenched from him as the pain shot from his testicles and through the nerve tracts of his body. It burst out of his skin in a myriad tiny detonations.

The baton electrode was removed and the pain slowly subsided. But Curt knew it would begin again. He had finally lost the picture of Alison and the children forever.

He thought he had delayed long enough, but there was no way he could be sure.

He fixed his mind on what the SAS sergeant had told him. In his confused state of mind he knew he must not get it wrong. They were using Bu'in airfield, so he would tell them another one, in a different direction entirely. One he remembered that had been considered for the US's own rescue attempt. By the time they had got there, and found he was lying, the British would be away.

He tried to speak, but no sound came from his parched throat. His vocal chords felt like dried sisal and his lips had crusted over.

Someone pushed a tin mug to his mouth and he tasted the trickle of brackish water.

"Lordakan." The word was spoken so quietly he couldn't even hear it himself. More water. He felt the mucus in his throat begin to soften. "Lordakan. Disused airfield . . . They told me Lordakan . . . That's all I know . . ."

The bus jolted over a pot-hole on the sand-blown strip of tarmac road. It stretched ahead to the horizon where it melted into the gathering heat haze.

Forbes doubted that the ancient vehicle, packed with passengers and its roof piled high with luggage, provisions and market goods, would actually make the next twenty miles north to Qum. But Hameda, seated beside him in her *chador*, seemed to have no such doubts. And she wasn't tempted to glance out of the dirt-caked rear window for signs of a Gendarmerie car in hot pursuit. Her eyes were red-rimmed and moist, and he guessed she'd been brooding over Curt Swartz Jnr.'s fate.

Although many of the fly-spattered windows were cracked or missing, the flow of dusty air did little to relieve the oppressive heat, or the pungent mix of diesel, paraffin and perspiring bodies. After a while the cackling of poultry and the poetry recitations from some passengers, shouted above the noise of the bus, conspired to give him a dreadful headache. So, despite his desire to put as many miles between themselves and Isfahan as possible, he was relieved when the bus pulled in at a roadside village of mud-brick houses.

The driver had decided to take his lunch break at the wayside tea-house, and the rest of his passengers seemed pleased to pile out into the shade of some lemon trees. Like other countries in the Middle East, Forbes had found no sense of urgency here. All around them baskets and bundles were opened. Bread, grapes and cucumber spilled out over the parched grass. A gaggle of inquisitive geese waddled forward on a noisy reconnaissance mission.

For the first time since Forbes and Hameda had squeezed onto the overcrowded bus, they couldn't be overheard by their fellow travellers.

"Don't be so sad," Forbes said. "Curt told me you always wanted to leave the country, and this is your big chance."

Hameda studied him closely and he could tell that beneath the *chador* she was smiling. "You are kind, Mr. Dave." He felt her hand on his. "But I wanted to go with him. Not leave him in danger whilst I go with a stranger . . ."

"Of course. But I think Curt can look after himself."

"You think he is all right?" Her eyes were big and innocent.

"I'm sure of it," he lied. "By the time we get to your relatives in – where is it? – Kerman, I expect he'll already be waiting for us."

They could have caught a train direct from Isfahan to the eastern town of Kerman, where they could stay in safety before moving on through Baluchestan to Pakistan. However Forbes had preferred Hameda's suggestion that they mingle immediately with the locals and catch the first bus north to Qum. To the sergeant it felt a bit like putting his head in the lion's mouth, because Qum was the Holy City and the spiritual centre of the religious men who ran the Islamic Revolution. But, he argued with himself, in that respect it was probably the last place their pursuers from Isfahan would expect them to go. And at least it removed them from the immediate danger.

Once there, they would be able to wait with less trepidation for a train that would take them on eventually to Kerman, via the towns of Kashan and Yazd. Hameda felt certain that her relatives would lend them their car.

"If it is working," she added.

"You mean it might not be?"

She shrugged. "It is old. An Austin Cambridge? But it usually goes all right in the summer. If you avoid steep hills. And if we can get petrol."

"Petrol?"

"It is difficult since the Shah left. But I am sure my relatives know people. They will get us some."

"I hope so," he muttered, "it's a damn long walk to Pakistan."

At that moment one of the passengers, an old man with a

yellowing white moustache, hobbled towards them, leaning heavily on a stick.

The leathery face cracked open in a toothless smile. "You two do not eat?"

Quickly Hameda replied, "No, we left in a hurry. My husband here oversleeps. We rush to catch the bus and he forgets our picnic bag!"

The old man chuckled and fished a cloth bundle from his ragged overcoat pocket. "But you must be hungry! I have a little something here. Much too much for me."

He squatted beside them and spread out the cloth around a small mound of goat's cheese, a boiled egg and a green tomato.

"We couldn't possibly . . ." began Forbes, but Hameda raised her hand to silence him.

"You are too kind," Hameda said. "May your shadow never grow less."

Again the old man chuckled. "What are we if we cannot help a fellow traveller along life's troubled road." He reached into his pocket and drew out some nougat, and held it out for them. Forbes had heard that Isfahan was well-known for it. "And this will sweeten the taste of dust on the rest of your journey."

Unaccountably Forbes felt a warm prickling sensation behind his eyes. He didn't trust himself to speak. He was pleased when the bus eventually started again. As he peered back out of the rear window, he knew he would always remember that lunch under the lemon trees. The last sign of the place was a yapping mongrel dog scampering after them. Half-a-mile later it disappeared in the swirling wake of dust.

CHAPTER TWELVE

ZAGROS MOUNTAINS: 2200 hrs Friday 19th September

At precisely ten o'clock the two Land Rovers purred into life. To a gentle gurgle of exhaust and swish of rubber against long grass, Panther One led the way out of the hide. The only trace of Snapdragon's six-day occupation was the acrid scent of petrol lingering in the glade.

Although Pogo had watched the guards scouring the valley below from his vantage point in the crags above the hide, and had seen them leave at sunset, Major Alan Hawksby was taking no chances. The easiest route would have been a southward dog-leg journey around a ridge of mountains that blocked their way. It would have taken them fifteen miles along a river valley, then given them the benefit of an unmade road that had once served to link Lordakan airfield with a nearby oil exploration camp.

But Hawksby had taken the direct cross-country approach south, straight over the ridge. It was slow, tough going but no one would have expected anything to come from that direction.

It had been a wise precaution.

McDermid's Panther One, driven by Jim Perkis, and carrying Tiger and Kangers Webster, had been in the lead. Hawksby followed a hundred yards behind in Panther Two with the rest of the party. The idea was that, should the 'point' vehicle run into trouble, the second would have a chance to get away with Blake and Eva Olsen. If the opportunity arose they might even be free to mount a counter-attack.

"*I think there's a wee problem, boss.*" There was no mistaking

McDermid's voice as it suddenly crackled in the Clansman radio head-set worn by Hawksby.

The major felt his heart sink. "What's up, Scottie?" As he spoke he tried to see where Panther One was located, but the dense blackness of the night defeated him.

"*C'mon see for y'self,*" McDermid replied. "*Y're safe te advance.*"

Hawksby nudged Pogo who sat next to him. The Fijian nodded and began to edge the vehicle slowly forward until they eventually drew alongside Panther One. McDermid was standing in the front seat scanning the airfield below with a Starlight 'scope.

He handed it across to Hawksby. "One, four and ten o'clock, boss. I'd say there's aboot four men in each party."

The strip itself was just a short unimproved stretch of level ground in a high mountain valley. There were no radars or navigational aids, just a derelict shed and rusting fuel tanks that once serviced the occasional light aircraft. Nearby were two mud-brick settlements used by a handful of shepherds who went to the uplands with their sheep for summer grazing.

The major studied each group of men in turn. They were concealed at the head of the airstrip and at either side. He could see the dull glint of gun metal as they shifted position. It was hard to tell from that distance, but he thought he could distinguish the long barrel of a heavy machine gun. After a full five minutes he lowered the Starlight 'scope. A nerve twitched involuntarily below his left eye.

"Some reception committee, eh, boss?" McDermid said, watching carefully for Hawksby's reaction.

Blake leaned forward from the open rear compartment. "How could they know?"

McDermid shot him a sideways glance. It was a question they'd all been asking themselves, and it was one that had a simple and unpalatable answer. Dave Forbes was in enemy hands and someone was putting on the squeeze. And if the veteran sergeant was talking, then someone was squeezing extremely hard. The Scotsman felt sick at the thought of it.

Swinging up onto the bonnet of Panther Two, Hawksby

scanned the airstrip again. "How they know is rather academic. It could be positive information or inspired guesswork." His voice was flat and unemotional.

For a moment McDermid considered the possibilities. "Y' mean Davy might noota said anything'?"

Hawksby's voice was icy. "You know him better than I do."

You bastard, McDermid thought savagely.

"You mean the man you left behind?" Blake challenged. He sounded very angry.

"Our men are trained to resist interrogation," Hawksby replied, lowering the 'scope.

McDermid eyed the journalist with disdain. "If someone puts y' balls in a steel vice an' spins t' wheel, ye tend te find anti-interrogation trainin' is no' all it's cracked up te be."

Hawksby cut in: "It's more than likely someone has put two and two together – and hit the jackpot. They know where the chopper landed and, after their search today, that there were no bodies. As Lordakan is only fifteen miles on a direct line, then there's a good chance it was going to be used for a pick-up." He glanced at his watch. "Looks like we've got just fifteen minutes before the Herc.'s due in."

"What a fucking cock-up," Blake muttered. It was hard to tell if his voice was quavering with anger, frustration or fear, or a mixture of all three.

"Keep it buttoned!" McDermid snarled.

"What d'ya reckon, boss?" Perkis asked. At least he sounded unperturbed.

Climbing down from the bonnet, Hawksby said quietly: "Well, as we've had contingency arrangements for just this sort of eventuality, I suggest we revert to Plan B."

In her seat next to Blake, Eva shook her head in slow disbelief. She was staggered at the calm way these soldiers were discussing the fact that their entire escape plan had blown up in their faces.

"T'is iss just a game to all off you, isn't it?" she challenged.

Hawksby threw her a hard, silencing glance, then moved away from the vehicles, beckoning McDermid to follow him out of earshot.

Although he appeared unruffled, the major's head was spinning with the implications of the ambush, and the horrendous problems they would face by having to execute the secondary plan. However carefully thought out, researched and rehearsed it had been, he had to admit that he had never really considered that it would ever have to be put into actual operation. He was uncomfortably aware that he was beginning to perspire. His mind ran over details of the alternative plan, examining each part for the flaws and difficulties that he was convinced must have been overlooked. Plan B had always been an academic exercise; just another training routine. He wished to God he'd been as thorough as he would have liked. If only there had been more time. If only the target hadn't been changed at the eleventh hour. If only . . .

McDermid joined him. "I dunna cherish the idea of a two hundred an' fifty mile dash south, te tell ye the truth, boss."

"It'll be no joy ride, Scottie, that's for sure. But let's tackle it one stage at a time." Hawksby looked up. Livid clusters of brilliant stars hung like tiny silver fruit in a cloudless night sky. "Our first problem is to prevent the Here from getting shot up. If Crazy K's mob got their hands on an RAF crew, they'd have a field day. Someone's going to have to signal the abort code, but at the same time I don't want that lot on the airstrip to come galloping after us – and getting Blake back."

McDermid chuckled. "Aye, 't'would rather defeat the object."

"So I suggest you stay with Panther One and give the rest of us enough time to put some miles between us. To get south from here means going through the airstrip valley. So whatever happens it's going to be a tight squeeze. And that mob down there are regular Army, I think."

"It's noo a problem, boss."

Hawksby was relieved. "Good, then we'd best get weaving." He pulled a tight but grateful smile.

The two men returned to their respective vehicles. Almost before Hawksby was in his seat, Pogo Penaia was gunning. Panther Two's engine and swing the ¾ ton giant down the one-in-three boulder-strewn slope.

"So it's on then?" Perkis asked as McDermid clambered into his seat.

"I dunna ken why y're lookin' so pleased, lad. A four-day cross-country drive isna my idea of a picnic."

The Cockney adjusted his CUB nightsight. "It's okay when yer drivin', Scottie, you don't notice the bumps. It's you poor bleedin' passengers I feel sorry for."

Kangers Webster leaned forward from the back seat. "Listen, you bloody Pom, just make sure it's a smooth ride. I've gotta be treated real gentle. I'm wounded."

"You'll be bleedin' walkin' wounded if you don't shut up," Perkis replied affably.

McDermid wasn't in the mood for banter. "Jim, I want y' te get this thing down tha' goat track an' wait for me halfway doon the south slope by tha' gorse patch. When the Herc comes in, I'm goin' te warn 'em off. Then I want our friends down there te come lookin' for me. Up the quickest way . . ."

"The west slope?" suggested Kangers.

"Got it in one. While they're fallin' o'er themselves te get te me, I'll slip back te join y'. When they get up here we'll make a break fer t' road. Okay?"

"Sounds fun." Perkis' grinning mouth looked incongruous beneath the sinister CUB goggles.

"This isna a bleedin' training exercise," McDermid sneered.

The driver raised his hands in mock horror. "Don't spoil it for me, Scottie. You trying to put the wind up us?"

Exasperated, the corporal climbed out and delved into one of the side-bins. He extracted a green steel ammunition case of 9 mm cartridges, some grenades and coils of fuse wire, and rope. Finally he picked up the small radio transmitter and added it to the pile at his feet, together with a Verey signal pistol he would use as a last resort.

"Okay?" Perkis asked.

The Scotsman swung the strap of the Uzi over his shoulder. "Better get a move on, the Brylcreem boys 'll show in a few minutes." He turned briefly to the Gurkha who was seated next to Kangers in the rear. "If I dunna make it, just see if y' can navigate this silly bastard te the coast, will y'?

He's too young to die, an' he's got a bairn on the way . . ."

"Leave it out," Perkis protested. He palmed the gearstick into first. "Good luck, Scottie."

McDermid looked down at the arsenal by his feet and sniffed boredly. "Roll on death," he muttered, "and let's fuck the angels."

Panther One growled away and was swallowed up in the velvet night.

Using a small Vordic pencil torch to see, McDermid began snipping varying lengths of explosive Cordtex fuse, which he looped round several 9 mm cartridges, leaving a short gap between each cluster. He then taped the prepared Cordtex wires alternately with lengths of safety fuse. Once lit, the heat from the Cordtex would be sufficient to explode the cartridges at indeterminate intervals as the linked fuses burned through.

To the unsuspecting Iranians below, it would represent unnerving scattered gunfire that would continue for some time.

He repeated the process three more times, positioning each of the linked fuses in a different location.

Finally he took a trip-wire spool from a standard flare tin and rigged up two booby-traps on the most likely routes of approach. In each case he fixed one end of the trip-wire to an L2 fragmentation grenade which he taped to another rock. With a pair of pliers he squeezed the gap of the safety split-pin and partially pulled it. Just the slightest pressure against the trip-wire and the grenade would blow.

He glanced at his watch. If the Herc was on time, there were just two minutes to go.

Then he recalled the look on the Hawk's face when they had spoken earlier. He'd never seen the major look quite like that before. If he hadn't known him so well, he'd have said that the boss was showing signs of strain. Not panic, the SAS major was too much of a pro for that. But McDermid felt certain that he had detected an air of desperation.

Perhaps, after all, a year wasn't that long to get under the skin of a bloke like Alan Hawksby. In Oman he'd had it all his own way. He'd seized the initiative from the enemy in the

beginning and kept it. He'd run rings round the rebel tribesmen and Yemeni troops, always planning and thinking ahead, always outwitting and, if necessary, out-fighting them. They never stood a chance.

Things were a bit different now though. Stuck in the middle of a hostile desert landscape, without support, knowing that the enemy was onto you, but not knowing just how far behind. And then problems exploding all around you like mortar shells. A bit different from Oman, all right.

McDermid squinted at the inky outline of the Zagros peaks beyond the airstrip below. No sign yet of Alpha Zulu.

His thoughts returned to the Hawk. Maybe that was it? Perhaps the major was really an HQ planner type? Okay when he was having it all his own way, but coming apart at the seams when the going got tough. He hoped not, because some sixth sense told him that things were going to get a damn sight tougher yet.

He dismissed the idea. Surely you didn't get to be a squadron commander in 22 if you couldn't take the rough with the smooth? The 'sickener' factor in all their training made sure of that. Everyone spoke of the Hawk with a respect bordering on awe. He was clever all right, and a bit distanced from his men, but never too much so. Perhaps he'd just had it too good for too long. After a spell with every assignment going like clockwork, he could be starting to believe his own publicity. McDermid hoped not. That would be a big mistake.

Then he heard the steady drone of the four giant Allison engines of the C130 Hercules at low level. Judging its whereabouts, though, was difficult. The noise was reverberating through the mountain range, bouncing from one peak to another.

He spoke into the radio: "Snapdragon te Dragonfly. Spider. Repeat. Spider. Over."

Nothing.

The regular beating sound grew louder until he was certain the heavy transport was coming in low from the far side of the strip. His eyes strained to pick up its shape against the irregular form of the mountains opposite. Then he caught

sight of it, wheeling slowly in through a narrow valley like a giant black bat. It was a superb bit of flying, McDermid thought, as it levelled up on its approach.

He repeated his message. Still no response. Whether the radio was faulty or the mountains were playing their usual tricks with communications, he had no way of knowing.

He had forlornly hoped that the pilot would need confirmation of the strip, but evidently Fontenoy knew exactly where he was.

The sudden brilliance of the emergency runway flares after the absolute darkness momentarily blinded McDermid.

He couldn't believe his eyes. "The bastards!" he breathed.

They were actually illuminating the strip with marker flares to lure Alpha Zulu down. And it was going to work: he saw the heavy undercarriage unfold as the Hercules dropped height in line for a perfect first pass landing.

There was no alternative. He picked up the Verey pistol and squeezed the trigger. He watched as the shooting star blasted skywards in a twisting trail of smoke. It burst at one hundred feet, exploding into a dazzling aurora of red light.

Muzzle flashes blinked from either side of the airstrip as the Iranian ambush parties were startled into action. From McDermid's vantage point on the peak, the gunfire sounded no more menacing than firecrackers.

Alpha Zulu's heavy landing wheels bounced once on the overgrown strip, picking up festoons of tumbleweed, then lifted again as the pilot poured on the power. The engines screamed, sounding like a demonic laugh as their noise echoed around the valley. With agonising slowness the Hercules peeled away from the blaze of automatic fire. Its starboard wing just skimmed above the ground as it banked away.

McDermid could imagine the pilot's confusion as he fought to gain enough height to clear the looming peak. For a moment the wings and bulky fuselage glittered in the incandescent glow of the fading flare. Then its thunder was deafening as it swooped low over his position, its churning propellers clawing for altitude.

He felt the downrush of air blast over him, and heard the angry rustle of leaves being torn from their branches. His eyes followed the massive black bulk that seemed to blot out the sky, flattening him against the ground. Then he lost it as it vanished over the peak behind him, its receding roar seeming to make the very earth tremble. McDermid caught his breath and then allowed himself a smile of satisfaction as he realised that for the moment they'd got away. He was wondering if Alpha Zulu would now be able to make it undetected back to the coast when his thoughts were interrupted by the commotion down on the strip.

Voices were raised and, in the glare of the runway flares, he could see black shapes running. Arms pointed up to where the Verey pistol had been fired. Quickly the corporal lit the master safety fuse and rolled across the patch of open ground to where the vegetation began. The sparse shrubs would cover his rapid descent down to the near-vertical rock face. He had been scrambling down the south slope for some time before he heard the first of the 9 mm cartridges start exploding. Live shells fired haphazardly in all directions like demented catherine wheels.

After a few minutes he stopped, his feet jammed against the roots of a tree which overhung the bare chalk cliff that fell away three hundred feet below. The exact length of the 7 mm rope he carried. He forced himself to take a deep breath as he looked down. Below it was an inky void. A bottomless pit that even the starglow failed to illuminate. Fear suddenly rushed in on him. Were the JARIC maps spot on? Was the coil of rope he carried over his shoulder long enough? Would it leave him dangling short? He pushed the thought from his mind. It was too late to worry about that now. Already he could see the flash of torchlights moving away from the strip. The Iranian troops were beginning to make their way nervously up the western slope towards the hysterical burst of gunfire McDermid had set in motion.

Swiftly he fixed the first rope around the thin tree stump behind him. It would probably hold, he decided. If not, it would bring away an avalance of loose rock with it. Dead and buried all in one.

He threaded the rope in a figure-of-eight around the 'descender' friction-brake which he hooked onto his belt. Then, grabbing the trailing rope in his right hand, he swung back outward. Just one final downward glance and he pushed hard with his boots against the chalk face and lifted his right arm. The pressure swung him away and he dropped like a stone, his feet touching the cliff momentarily every twenty feet. Bend the knees and push out again . . . And again, all the time feeding the rope through the friction-brake.

A tiny black spider against the vast wall of chalk, he finally descended into the shadowy depths of the cliff.

He slowed down, aware he had abseiled far too quickly. The skin on his hands was scorched from the running rope and the friction-brake. But he was safe now, hidden in darkness. Blisters and weals were a small price to pay compared with a high-velocity round from some keen-eyed Iranian marksman.

McDermid took his time over the last few feet. He was careful not to sprain his ankle stupidly on the jagged scree at the valley floor. By the time he was unharnessed, the sound of detonating shells from the peak above his head had ceased. All he could hear were distant shouts in Farsi.

A sharp whistle split the immediate quietness. Two harsh notes.

It was Kangers Webster calling from the shapeless mass of nearby gorse bushes. Hurriedly he scrambled over the sea of fallen chalk and rocks until he could make out the stubby rear of Panther One.

"Pull yer finger out, Mac!" hissed the Australian. He was crouched behind the black shape of the L37 general-purpose machine gun that jutted menacingly out of the rear compartment. "Someone took an interest in your Spiderman impersonation. There's a vehicle comin' from the strip. Tryin' to cut you off."

"Shit!" McDermid clambered into the front passenger seat. The familiar smell of paint, leather and oil was comforting. He lifted himself in the seat and peered down the incline towards the strip. "How many men in it?"

"Don't know," Perkis replied tightly, slipping the gear into first, "but do you mind if we don't hang around to count 'em?"

Without waiting for a reply the East Ender let out the clutch. Panther One growled and all four tyres contemptuously kicked out chalk fragments as it jolted forwards like a startled animal.

"One to Two". In the rear Tiger was talking on the headset of the Clansman. "Moving now. Contact. One vehicle following. Out."

The SAS Land Rover broke from cover like a bat out of hell. With Perkis grasping the wheel at a relaxed ten-to-two position, the vehicle hit the dried grass flats of Lordakan airstrip flat out at sixty.

They had lost sight of the approaching Iranian vehicle and were astonished when they nearly collided with it coming the other way.

Although it was another Land Rover, it was no match for Panther One with its infra-red headlights and CUB night-drive gear. The three Iranians were shaken rigid as the totally blacked-out SAS vehicle shot past them out of the night.

By the time they had swung their vehicle round in a circle, Perkis had already launched his machine at the first of two dried-up river beds at full revs. The chassis hammered down into the wadi after leaving the ground with a squeal of protest from the heavy-duty shock absorbers. A fog of dust blasted up behind them as the sand-tyres bit into the cracked earth and found a purchase. Expertly, Perkis palmed the stick down into second, and they were away again, the airstrip disappearing fast behind them.

"Jesus!" Kangers swore. "If them mad mullahs don't get us, bleedin' Perkis will."

"Belt up!" McDermid hissed, feeling distinctly queasy. He'd never felt seasick on land before. But Kangers ignored him and continued making wisecracks that only Tiger could hear in the slipstream.

For a mile they kept well in front of the pursuing Land Rover, the drunken sweep of its headlights betraying its

cumbersome progress. Then Perkis hit a problem attempting to cross the second wadi.

The far embankment rose up like a wall, almost vertical. Perkis slammed on the brakes and Panther One fish-tailed to a shuddering halt.

"Fuck," Perkis said, almost politely.

"Even you can't do that . . ." McDermid muttered. Then he was thrown forward in his safety-belt as the driver slammed the vehicle into reverse. Another hard brake and back into first. Kangers hit his head against the butt of the GPMG.

He felt the blood with his fingers. "Stone me, Perkis. I'll. . ." Whatever his threat, it was lost beneath the pounding roar of the engine as Perkis swung Panther One left, speeding south over the mosaic of cracked mud. Behind them the Iranians had gained. The probing fingers of light were now closer and more menacing. The gap began to close again as the driver took advantage of Perkis' misfortune.

At last the bank gave way to a shallow slope and Panther One was able to churn its way through a patch of soft ground to join the road south.

Perkis was shaking his head. "They're lighter than us. They'll catch us on the road."

McDermid swung around in his seat. "Slow down, Jim. Let 'em get close an' we'll give 'em a wee surprise. Shake up their liver a bit."

As Perkis eased up, the corporal reached over to Kangers Webster. "HOLD Y' FIRE TILL WE GET 'EM AT A HUNDRED METRES! OPEN UP WHEN I GIVE THE WORD!"

Kangers nodded and gave a thumbs-up, as McDermid motioned Tiger to hand forward the Clansman headset.

"One to Two?" he demanded. "Over."

"Send sitrep. Over." It was Hawksby's voice. He sounded unperturbed, almost nonchalant. McDermid grinned as he heard the major add: "*You still in contact? Over*".

"Roger. Am slowing. Will engage. Over."

Hawksby's voice crackled again. "*Good luck. RV at two bridges. Out.*" That was some eighteen miles ahead.

More like the Hawk we know and love, McDermid thought. He handed back the headset to Tiger.

Now they had slowed to thirty and the Iranian Land Rover was gaining on them fast along the metalled road. McDermid put his full concentration on the widening eyes of light behind them.

Perkis had not wasted time when waiting for McDermid earlier. There were two fan-shaped dischargers on the rear of Panther One, each housing three firing tubes for L7 grenades that could be lobbed a full hundred metres, providing a blinding semi-circle of smoke to screen their escape. Perkis had replaced the contents with L5s. White phosphorus smoke that burned the skin and seared the lungs. More effective. His hand shifted towards the firing-button.

In the rear Kangers flipped up the breech lid of the GPMG and checked the feed-in of the first four rounds of the belt. Alternate two ball and one tracer. Lethal. And pretty. Bright fire-flies in the night that could mesmerise the enemy and tell you exactly where you were pouring in the deadly high-velocity shells. He cranked the cocking handle and lined his eye down the sight.

McDermid squinted into the brilliant dazzle. Waiting. Panther One seemed to have slowed almost to a halt. The slipstream all but faded, the engine unusually quiet. It seemed an age.

A shot cracked towards them from the Land Rover. No one heard where it went.

McDermid forced himself to count.

"Christ!" Perkis said. "Ain't they there yet, Scottie?"

"Stow it!" snapped the reply.

The Iranians hit McDermid's imagined hundred metre mark. "Okay, Kangers, give it 'em."

The stammering bark of the GPMG at close quarters was ear-shattering, as the Australian swung the blazing barrel in an arc across the bonnet of the approaching vehicle. Beneath his hands the trembling gun metal felt good. He was aware of the spent cartridges thudding into the canvas catch bags that hung beneath the weapon. It was good to strike back, he thought. Good to relieve the tension of the past weeks that left

you feeling like an over-wound clock spring. Despite the oncoming headlights he had managed to shatter the bulbs. The world plunged into darkness but it was impossible to tell if anyone had been hit, because the vehicle kept on coming, and someone was alive enough to let rip a burst of returning fire. McDermid heard one of the shells zing against a side-bin. "Perkis!" he shouted.

The driver hit the switch. The blast of the six L5s detonating simultaneously seemed to jolt Panther One forward.

A billowing cloud of caustic white phosphorous smoke swirled up instantaneously, like some ferocious pantomime genie. In a split second the pursuing Land Rover was devoured in the gushing wall of smoke.

Kangers pumped another prolonged burst into the turmoil and they heard the vehicle's fuel tanks blow.

Still turned, McDermid felt himself pushed against the seat-back by the surge of power as Perkis accelerated away. All he saw was the vague shape of the vehicle in the middle of the inferno. One man broke through on foot, starkly outlined against the brilliant glow. His clothes were ablaze. Kangers killed him with the very last round of the complete belt he'd fed into the GPMG.

As they turned a bend in the road the only reminder of the brief and bloody encounter was a faint glimmer in the sky. It took just fifteen minutes for Perkis to cover the distance to the second bridge, travelling at a breakneck sixty miles an hour along the twisting mountain road.

Panther Two was parked at the far side of a deep ravine, spanned by an ancient stone bridge. It hardly looked capable of supporting even pedestrian traffic.

"We shook 'em off, boss," McDermid announced with an air of triumph as soon as they drew alongside.

Hawksby didn't share the Scotman's optimism. "There'll be more of them no doubt, but it's a good start. We've wired this bridge to blow in five minutes. That should cause a few problems to any vehicles trying to follow."

"It iss a shame to destroy such a beautiful old bridge." It was Eva who spoke from her seat in the back of Panther Two.

McDermid was amazed. "This isna Architectural Heritage Year in Iran, is it?"

"Leave it out, Scottie," Hawksby chided. He turned to address the occupants of both vehicles. "Now listen, all of you. Despite our setbacks we're still all together and ahead of the enemy. We've got the initiative and it's imperative to keep it if we're going to beat the odds. Our friends here will no doubt be pleased to know that we do have contingency plans to cover the sort of problems we've just encountered . . ." He went on, "I want to make good time for as long as night lasts, to put as many miles as possible between us. I intend, therefore, to make maximum use of these good roads, whilst the Iranians are still in a state of confusion. It's a calculated risk. But the farther away we get, the wider area the enemy will have to search. We'll keep heading south down this mountain road, turning left at Kalvart Olya where there's a junction with another road from the north. Ten miles south again there's another bridge which I also intend to take out." He turned to Eva. "Sorry about that."

She couldn't prevent the involuntary flicker of a smile.

He continued: "Some thirty miles beyond that we'll reach a large wooded valley, running alongside the Beshar River. It'll be as good a place as we're likely to find in this lunar landscape." He glanced at his watch. "Right, it's 0100 hours, so let's get weaving. We've a long way to go."

Despite herself Eva could not prevent a thrill of excitement at the major's words. As she'd already said, he seemed to treat the appalling catalogue of events as though it were a kind of game. Nevertheless, she had to admit it was a game he seemed to take seriously. His qualities of leadership were obvious and appealing. However crazy this adventure, which was wildly beyond anything she had ever experienced before, she felt safe under the protection of his hard-bitten team who seemed to thrive on adversity.

Major Alan Hawksby's manner, she decided, made a refreshing change from the evangelic convictions of Jonathan Blake. Whereas the journalist saw the world in shades of grey, Hawksby seemed to see it just as a series of immediate challenges to be met, fought and won.

He was a hard bastard, and no mistake. Idly she speculated on what made him tick; what it was inside that drove him on?

These were the thoughts uppermost in her mind as Pogo Penaia swung their vehicle into the dusty trail made by Panther One as it took the lead on the road south.

ISFAHAN: 0100 hrs, Saturday 20th September

As Curt Swartz Jnr. came round, it was like surfacing after a deep dive in clear waters. Then the pain hit him. He closed his eyes against the burning force of the interrogation lamps, but he didn't have to see to know the state of his tortured body. His entire torso burned as though on fire.

Suddenly he became aware of a voice in his ear and could smell almonds on the breath of his tormentor.

"You have done well, Mr Swartz." The modulated voice was soothing like a balm. "We are most grateful for your co-operation."

"I can't see."

"Of course." Considerate. "Turn off those lights."

Immediately the sun went out and Curt felt the throbbing pain in his temples subside.

"Water."

"Let's not rush things, Mr. Swartz." Again the voice of velvet. "You shall have something to drink, but first you must help us some more."

Curt tried to focus his mind. As he did so, the voice went on: "You were right about Lordakan airstrip, of course. Please forgive me for having doubted your word. But, unfortunately, although we prevented the rescue aircraft from landing, my men failed to apprehend your colleagues. So now I want to know of their contingency plans." A pause to let the significance soak in. "What would they do if their plan failed?"

I don't understand. Correct about Lordakan? It was a pack of lies. It couldn't be correct. I'd been told where it really was. Have I betrayed them? Have I inadvertently got

it wrong? Had the SAS sergeant told me Lordakan after all and not Bu'in? Oh, God, no.

He felt sick. "Water." His parched plea was a scarcely audible croak.

"Water," commanded the velvet voice.

A tin mug was pressed to his lips, and he gulped eagerly. Suddenly he drew in his breath and spat it out. Salt!

"Tell us, Swartz, then you will have water. What was to be the plan if the Lordakan pick-up failed?"

"BASTARDS!" Curt screamed at the top of his voice, squeezing all the power in his lungs. But in the interrogation room all they heard was an incoherent mumble.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

ZAGROS: 0230 hrs, Saturday 20th September

"Trouble, boss," warned John Belcher.

He was seated in the back of Panther Two with Blake and Eva. Hawksby swivelled round in the front passenger seat and glanced back along the road. The swirling dust reduced the distant headlamps to minute orbs of light.

"How far d'you reckon, John? Two miles?"

"Nearer three, I'd say."

As Hawksby reached to the radio, wedged behind the front seat, the headset came alive in his ear. It was McDermid who was riding point in Panther One. "*One to Two. Contact ahead, boss. Looks like a roadblock. Probably gendarmes. About a mile to half-mile ahead.*"

Hawksby glanced at Blake and Eva. "It never rains but it bloody well buckets." He spoke into the mike. "Two, Roger. Is there anywhere safe to pull off the road up there, Scottie?"

Instantly the voice came back. "*A derelict building on our left. Looks like it was once a tea-house. Over.*"

"We'll join you there in a couple of minutes, Scottie. Get well out of sight, we've just picked up a tail. Out."

He just caught sound of the Glaswegian blaspheming.

Five minutes later they found the collapsed mud-brick house and drove off the road into a shallow that was hidden from passing traffic. McDermid was watching the roadblock through a pair of binoculars. Although the police vehicles had their lights out, the flashing hand torches were like beacons in the vastness of the black landscape that dropped away to the south.

At least we can see them before they see us," Hawksby said as he accepted the proferred binoculars.

"It's still goin' te slow us doon too much, boss. It'll take a couple o'hours te pass them off the road. And we'll be sittin' ducks come daylight. We're still much too near Lordakan. They're boond te locate us if they organise an extensive search."

Blake had climbed stiffly down from his seat. "What d'you have in mind, Major?"

Hawksby resisted the temptation to accuse him of getting windy. "A diversion," he replied to no one in particular. "I seem to remember a pipeline marked on the map just before we stopped."

McDermid grinned. "Aye, boss, it's t' main gas link te the south. Mostly it runs undergroond, but I noticed the culvert aboot a mile back where it passes under t' road."

"Splendid," Hawksby replied.

"You don't think an explosion is going to stop them looking for us, do you?" Blake challenged.

"Have you ever seen a gas pipeline go up, Jonathan?"

"No."

"Then be a good chap, and reserve your judgment, eh?"

When the pipeline went it seemed like a thermo-nuclear blast to the gendarmes manning the roadblock.

It had taken McDermid and Tiger half-an-hour to return to the culvert and fix a charge of 1 lb of PE4 plastic explosive with a time fuse. On a last-minute impulse the Scotsman had insisted on giving the delay an extra couple of minutes. Having seen the four-foot diameter pipes close up, his imagination had begun to work overtime. There was over a million cubic feet of liquid gas between the two nearest shut-off valve stations on the pipeline.

As it turned out, it was to be a decision that saved their lives. On the return trip Tiger had sprained an ankle. It was only a minor injury but it slowed the pair of them down. Had they been caught in the open in the maelstrom that followed, they would have been blasted from the face of the earth. They had only just rejoined the others behind a giant shoulder of solid rock, when it blew.

It was hard to tell which came first. A momentous blast

lightened the sky like a gargantuan thunderbolt coming from deep within the ground. A mushroom of brightness radiated upward in a series of pulsing ripples, each more blinding than the last. The sound shook the earth beneath their feet and, despite the distance, the pain in their eardrums was intense. Almost immediately they heard something like a rolling barrage of heavy artillery as the pipeline ruptured on either side of the road. Great curves of steel pipework were spewed high into the air, amid a hail of earth and rock. The continuous roar went on, fed by the gas being pumped down the line.

Worst of all was the main blast which tore down the road as an awesome unseen force, uprooting trees and bushes as though they were mere bits of matchwood. They were nearly asphyxiated as the spiralling fireball sucked in the oxygen from the surrounding landscape.

"Jesus H . . .!" Perkis began.

"I reckon Paynes Fireworks might give us a job when we leave the Army, boss," McDermid murmured.

Behind them Blake and Eva were speechless.

Hawksby lifted the binoculars to his eyes and watched the gendarmes fight to get into their cars and race towards the mysterious apocalypse just behind the hill. "C'mon," he said. "Time we got going."

ISFAHAN: 0315 hrs, Saturday 20th September

A report of the gas explosion near the village of Meymand reached Colonel Murad at Isfahan exactly fifteen minutes later.

Despite the hysterical pleadings of the local commander of the Gendarmerie on the other end of the radio, he refused to be hurried. Wearily, he crossed the office to where his aide was studying the giant wall map.

The younger man stuck a pin into the spot where the gas pipeline crossed the road south. "That's where they are – the sons of Satan!" He turned to his superior. "Do we go now?"

Calmly Murad lit his umpteenth cigarette of the past

forty-eight hours. It tasted excruciatingly foul. "We are all tired, my friend. And that is when people make mistakes. These mysterious invaders have had time to rest. Obviously they are very experienced and are probably much fresher than us."

"But the explosion . . ." the aide protested.

". . . Serves no purpose," Murad cut in, impatient at the slowness of his aide to learn. "Except that it has our men on the spot flapping like a lot of old women. No doubt that was the intention. If we went there, I have no doubt that we would find the entire battalion at my disposal standing and staring at the damage . . . while our quarry slipped away."

The aide sighed and looked back at the map. "But where to?"

"If the American is to be believed, they will be moving south to the coast. Do not be down-hearted. Yesterday there was every chance they would get away. Tonight we have prevented that. Yesterday they could have been anywhere in Iran. Tonight – just fifteen minutes ago – we knew they were at Meymand. So why the gloom? The trap is closing in on them." Murad blew a smoke ring at the pin on the map. It hit the perspex covering and burst into a rolling blue wreath. "Now they do not have far to go before daylight. Then they will need shelter. Where would you go if you were them?"

"The forest?" The aide suggested, hopefully. "Shade and water from the Beshar River."

Murad smiled, his heavy eyelids almost closing. He drew a deep breath. "So let us forget about the gas blow-out. That is now the concern of the Energy Ministry. Let us arrange a roadblock on the outskirts of the forest valley to the south. That will cut them off. Then we shall fly down and take command of the search on the spot."

An hour later their army helicopter landed at the roadblock.

Although the personnel was composed of a motley collection of revolutionary guards, regular troops and gendarmes, a competent job had been made. Vehicles had been driven across the road, each nudging the next, so that any attempt to ram a way through would just lock them more tightly

together. The area was some twenty-five miles south of the gas blow-out, which could still be seen as an incandescence on the horizon. The site had been carefully selected for the steep embankment on either side of the road. Two machine guns and supporting fire teams had been placed at the top of each bank. The entire perimeter of the roadblock had been sealed off with coils of barbed wire and oil cans.

The Army lieutenant in charge had deduced from reports of earlier clashes that the strangers were driving on infra-red lights and had been most insistent that none of his men used lights or smoked cigarettes. Murad at last felt guardedly optimistic. His headache was beginning to recede along with his fatigue.

Then they saw it. The brief flash of headlights.

"There!" the lieutenant cried. "On the crest of the hill."

The headlights had been dowsed as quickly as they had come on, but most of the men had seen them. A gabble of excited chatter broke out.

Murad frowned. "I thought you said they were using infra-red?"

The lieutenant shrugged. "Maybe they just wanted to get a better look at us?"

"No matter. Get half your men together and two vehicles, and come with me to the top of the hill." The soldier started to move but Murad restrained him. "For God's sake tell them to be careful. This enemy is good and could be setting a trap." As engines roared into life around him, Murad reflected bitterly that since the mullahs' purges there were few competent officers like the lieutenant left in the armed forces. He climbed into one of the vehicles. Not long now.

It took only moments to reach the top of the hill. A detachment of troops debussed from their vehicles to complete the approach on foot. The young lieutenant led.

There was nothing there.

Someone shone a torch beam on the dust-smeared tarmac. Murad knelt down and studied the tracks made by sets of heavy-duty sand tyres. "This is where they left the road. When we saw those lights flash, that must have been when they saw us. Just ten minutes ago."

The lieutenant looked pleased. "Two vehicles by the look of it. They cannot have got far."

Something was wrong, decided Colonel Murad, but what? For a moment he studied the smashed undergrowth at the west side of the road where the enemy vehicles had veered off to circumvent the roadblock. "Get your men organised with all the vehicles capable of cross-country travel. We shall begin a sweep as soon as you have them assembled."

The efficient young lieutenant who commanded the Iranian search detachment had never heard the anecdote about tracking SAS troops in snow. If he had, it might have occurred to him that he was organising his sweep in completely the wrong direction. On exercise in Norway, troops from the regiment had been known to cross snow-covered clearings by walking backwards to throw their pursuers off the scent.

Hawksby had used a similar ploy as soon as McDermid had located the position of the roadblock. Both Panther One and Two had pulled off the road, then reversed back onto it farther along, at the peak of the hill. They continued backward up the road, away from the roadblock, flashing a set of hand spotlights as they went.

As the Iranians and their vehicles left the road, moving westward like beaters on a pheasant shoot, the Snapdragon team was by-passing the roadblock to the east. When the six o'clock sun began warming the chill mountain air an hour later, the two SAS vehicles had drawn to a halt on the secluded upper slopes of the Beshar River valley.

Shafts of pale yellow light were slanting through the trees, as Hawksby stepped down wearily onto the thick carpet of pine needles. He glanced up at the canopy of branches, through which he could see fragments of powder-blue sky.

The foliage was a bit thin and he ordered his exhausted team to begin rigging the camouflage netting over the vehicles and the space between them that would serve as a tented living area. Hessian was used to kill the tell-tale glare of the windscreens and poles were erected to distort the

vehicle shapes and support the leaf-cut rubber foliage of the netting.

No more than a few real branches were needed to add the finishing touches. A reconnaissance pilot would be hard pressed to spot a camouflaged vehicle at one mile. If he hadn't seen it by then, the speed of his approach would blur his vision to an extent that made identification impossible.

Hawksby stepped back to check the work. It was good, even from ground level. And if enemy aircraft were using ground-search radar, the signals would be absorbed by the specially-treated leaves of the netting so that the returning echo gave nothing away. Even if the Iranians were very crafty and used infra-red systems to pick up vehicle heat-spots amid the forest, the special paint pigment on the Panthers was designed to have identical reflective qualities to the chlorophyll in the surrounding natural foliage.

By now the sun was rapidly gaining in strength but Hawksby had decided that Blake and Eva should not be allowed to think they were passengers on some adventure holiday. With the promise of food later, they were dispatched under John Belcher's guidance to dig solar stills on the upper slopes of the valley. As they left the hide, Hawksby was sending out McDermid and Perkis on the first picket watch, to look out for anything approaching from the north or west. At the same time Tiger was scaling a tree, dragging up the 40-feet horizontal aerial of the A13 Skywave transmitter. This would eventually bounce their message off the ionosphere on its long journey back to Britain.

As he trudged up the slope after Belcher, it was the sight of the Gurkha struggling in the trees, to unhelpful instructions from Kangers Webster on the ground, that started Blake thinking. He was so deep in thought that he hardly noticed the bone-hardness of the earth under the entrenching spade as they began the first of half-a-dozen small pits. Neither was he really listening as Belcher explained how they were designed to attract the moisture content from the ground. Each one, promised the soldier, would yield two litres of water by the end of the day.

Totally shattered, Blake prised away the last heavy scab of

compacted earth, and staggered back into the shade of a nearby tree. Eva, who had been given the slightly less arduous task of scooping out the loose pieces, peeled the damp hair from her forehead and stumbled over to join him. Her fatigues were black with sweat and clung to the contours of her body. She dropped down beside him. Too tired to speak immediately they watched as Belcher began spreading foliage around the cans he had placed in the centre of each pit.

At last finding her breath, Eva said: "It iss very clever. To find water in a place like t'is."

Jarred from his thoughts, Blake laughed harshly. "I'll remember that next time I'm stranded in a desert."

She looked at him, concerned. "What iss it, Jon'i? We iss free and on our way 'ome. I know t'ere iss dangers, but t'ese people are very capable. Yet you seem – I don't know – troubled."

He studied his outstretched feet. "I am troubled. Very troubled. And so should you be."

She was bewildered. "Why?"

Even dressed in baggy battle fatigues, she managed to look stunningly feminine. He found himself fascinated by the beads of perspiration glistening at the open neck of her shirt. He felt a need for her stirring in him. "I think they've been ordered to kill us."

Eva stared at him. "You iss mad," she accused. "T'ey 'af only just rescued us. Besides, t'ey iss British."

He gave a snort of laughter. "Don't you believe all the propaganda the British put out about themselves. The Establishment is as ruthless as anything in the world. And a damn sight more cunning than most. That's how they survive. They've been at it since medieval times. I know, I've been fighting them throughout my reporting career . . ."

"But why kill us?" It still seemed absurd.

"It's obvious we've been rescued because of Fulcrum. Somehow – God knows – they realise we have all the details."

She frowned. "It iss not because you iss a British hostage? Like the Americans."

"Act your age, Eva!" He almost spat out the words. "Have

you any idea of the cost of mounting a mission like this? I'll tell you: it's millions. And the risks! Jesus Christ, there are Englishmen languishing in some prison or other in every poxy country in the world, and they don't send out the SAS to get them back. For all her promises, Her Britannic Majesty just lets the poor bastards rot."

She watched unseeing as John Belcher started pegging out khaki-coloured plastic sheets over each hole, placing a heavy stone on the centre of each to form an inverted cone. "Obviously t'ey do not want t'e Iranians to know about Fulcrum. It would be embarrassing. T'at I understand."

Blake was losing patience. "And you think they'll allow us to tell the world when we get home?"

"We said we would. We agreed . . ." She began, suddenly realising what he was getting at.

"When we stopped at the camp earlier, I asked the major if I could have your roll of Minox film. He refused. Point blank. He said it would be safer with him."

Eva shrugged, unsure. "Maybe 'e iss right."

"Bullshit!" He glared out of the shade at Belcher who was completing his task, making sure that the presence of the stills would not be obvious from the air. "The major has denied he knows why we're wanted by his government, yet he's made no attempt to find out when I've baited him."

"Per'aps 'e 'as ot'er t'ings on 'is mind." She was being sarcastic and it rankled. "Per'aps 'e does what every soldier iss supposed to do. Get on wit' orders and not ask questions."

Blake shook his head vehemently. "If I was him and I *really* didn't know, I would try and find out something about why I was risking my neck."

"*You* iss a journalist," she reminded him. Belcher had picked up his spade and was returning wearily to them.

Quickly Blake said: "I'll put it to the test. I've had an idea. And I'll see if they can't let us carry arms. For self-defence . . ."

Eva went to speak but stopped as Belcher's shadow fell across them. "There you are, my beauties, that's how it's done! And, medically speaking, of course, water's more important than food. We'll have twelve litres of the stuff by

this evening. That'll help keep our reserves intact!" He was smiling broadly.

Blake smiled back. "Bloody brilliant!"

A look of uncertainty crossed Belcher's face. He wasn't sure how to take it.

Breakfast, when it came, was scarcely worth the long wait. Faces smiled with anticipation when the self-heating rations began hissing as water was added to the sodium carbide in the cans. The mood lightened as they gathered in the tented living area. But when the fluid stew was dolloped unceremoniously by John Belcher into the proffered mess-tins, faces fell.

Eva wrinkled her nose. "Iss t'ese edible?" she asked seriously. Already tiredness had caused a feeling of nausea, and the sight of the food didn't help.

Belcher got stuck in. "If it's good enough for the major's cat, then it's good enough for us," he enthused through a mouthful of the stuff.

Kangers looked at Eva in mock affront. "So what's wrong with kangeroo meat?" The SAS men laughed. Having eaten rat casserole on survival training exercises, the complaints were a mere ritual. Blake and Eva on the other hand, looked genuinely sick at the sight of it. The journalist ate a few mouthfuls then pushed it aside. He decided it was fear that had destroyed his appetite, and resolved to make an issue of their fate with Hawksby.

The major was pleased to find the rest of the group in such good humour. If ever that disappeared he knew he was in real trouble. Despite the setbacks, their morale seemed high and even the most unappetising meal was enough to restore their spirits. He reached for the aluminium kettle on the Gaz burner and poured the hot water over a teabag in a black plastic mug.

As the teabag was passed around the circle, Blake said casually: "I think, Major, that Eva and I should be armed. As it is we have no means of defence, and we could be a help if there's shooting."

Hawksby peered at him over the rim of his mug. "There're

seven of us with weapons, Jonathan. That's likely to be enough. It's dangerous having two inexperienced people wielding lethal firearms."

"You could instruct us," Eva suggested.

"It won't be necessary," Hawksby replied, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. There was a finality to his voice. Subject closed.

The girl exchanged glances with Blake. He said: "Like it won't be necessary to give Eva back her film."

"I've told you, I feel happier if I keep it."

Blake's voice was edged with anger. "Then you must know what's in it." It was a flat statement.

The major ran a hand through his beard. It needed trimming. "I know it's important to you. And if it's important to you, then the chances are the contents are also of interest to the British Government. And they are paying the piper."

"Typical fascist attitude! So you're confiscating it?" Blake challenged.

"No, old chap. I'm looking after it, that's all."

"You *do* know what's in it!"

Hawksby was getting angry. "By the fuss you're making I know damn well you've something to hide." His eyes narrowed. "How about *you* telling me what's in it?"

The journalist's face contorted. "Piss off, Major!"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Frankly, I wouldn't trust you further than I can spit!" Eva placed a restraining hand on his arm. He shook it off. "It's got to be said. I think you're just waiting for the opportunity to kill me, aren't you? Shut me up for good and protect the lily-white name of the British Government!"

Hawksby's mouth dropped open in amazement. His tea spilled. The circle of SAS men exchanged glances, as though to check with each other that they weren't hearing things.

"Jon'i!" Eva warned.

For a moment the group sat in stunned silence.

Hawksby regained his composure. "I assume that this isn't your idea of a joke, Jonathan? But I wonder what in God's name you think we've been doing, risking life and limb

to save your precious neck? It is not, I assure you, just for the pleasure of bumping you off."

Despite his conviction, Blake suddenly felt foolish. "I don't expect you to admit it."

"I wouldn't, Jonathan, because it's not true. And, if it was, we could have done it at anytime since we left Isfahan. Forget about any fairy tales you hear about the forces. War may be a different matter, but in peacetime we are under many constraints. Political assassination is not one of our tasks. For one, we just wouldn't accept such orders. And for another, we're too close to the government of the day."

"The boss is right," Tiger added. "If someone wants to get rid of you, they take out a contract with private outfit."

Blake eyed Hawksby suspiciously. "I've only got your word for that. I know the SAS is the strike arm of the Foreign Office."

"Not in that way," the major replied quietly. "And I am afraid you have only my word to trust. If you genuinely think our orders are discreetly to get rid of you, you're barking up the wrong tree. I promise you, if anyone made an attempt to take your life, he'd have me and my team to reckon with. That includes the Foreign Secretary, the Prime Minister, or even the Queen herself. My orders come direct from the Master." He paused, realising that Blake didn't understand. "That's our commanding officer. And he would not issue such an order . . ."

". . . But if he did?" Blake provoked.

It was Kangers Webster who spoke. "You'd be dead."

Hawksby flashed the Australian a daggers look that could have drawn blood. He turned back to Blake. "There is no such order, Jonathan. But if you even suspect that there might be, it reinforces my justification in holding onto that film."

Blake sneered. "And refusing us guns?"

The major's eyelids lowered and the journalist suddenly recognised the cold hawk-like expression. "Very much so."

"If what you say is true," Blake said after a moment's thought, "then I'd like you to send a message. You're going to make a transmission, aren't you?"

Intrigued by the reason behind the journalist's obvious fear, Hawksby began filling his clay pipe with tobacco. "Yes, we're set to transmit around noon. Whitehall will be shittin' bricks until they hear from us –" He turned to Eva apologetically. "I beg your pardon."

She shrugged and smiled.

"Then in your message tell them I know what their game is," Blake said savagely. "Tell them I know they want to kill me, and to keep their hands off!"

Hawksby was bemused as he drew on his pipe. "Verbatim?"

"Word for bloody word," Blake retorted. "Put the record straight. And let them know that you *also* know what I suspect."

A sweet smelling cloud of Dutch tobacco drifted through the living area. Thoughtfully Hawksby said: "If that's what you want, Jonathan? Yes, I'll do that for you." Taken aback, Blake stared at the major for a second. Then he relaxed. There was nothing more he could do. As he began picking at his meal in silence, Eva Olsen studied the expression on Major Hawksby's face.

At precisely 1204, Snapdragon's Morse message went out over the A13 Skywave transmitter. It was scrambled through the 'squirt box' attachment so that the high-speed broadcast was condensed to mere seconds.

Tiger switched to 'Receive' and glanced at the gathering of soldiers around Panther One. He smiled nervously. As usual, erecting the aerial coil through the treetops had been a pig of a job and there was no guarantee that any of the message would be picked up by the Government Communications Headquarters in Cheltenham. More likely was a partial atmospheric distortion, particularly prone to occur when transmitting from high mountainous terrain like the Zagros.

If they received no acknowledgment they would have to try again. And again. And with every transmission the danger of radio direction-finders in Teheran locating their position would increase.

Hawksby lay back in the front passenger seat, his forage

cap peak tilted over his eyes. The jutting clay pipe let out a twist of smoke. He tried with great deliberation to relax. After all, he had chosen Tiger because he was the best. Five minutes passed.

Jim Perkis, now replaced on his picket duty by Kangers Webster, tried to get to sleep, curled in his green maggot under Panther Two. Exhausted as he was, his mind kept turning, thinking of his wife Janet. The baby had been due yesterday. Earlier he had thought seriously of asking the Hawk to ask after her in his transmission. He had asked McDermid's advice. Not surprisingly, the taciturn Scot had said flatly no. Obvious really, it just helped to have a confirming opinion. He rolled over and covered his head with his arms.

Suddenly Tiger let out a whoop. "Eureka!" He pulled off the headset. "Acknowledged, boss. They will transmit confirmation of our request same time tomorrow. 1200 hours."

ISFAHAN: 1200 hrs, Saturday 20th September

Curt Swartz Jnr. curled in the corner of the bare cell like a frightened child. His knees were drawn up to his chest and he peered out at a hostile world with wide, blood-shot eyes. No one had come near him for the past five hours. They had told him they had finished with him. They had assured him they would not come back. He had done well, they said, but he didn't believe them.

He knew they would come back. It had taken immense concentration to concoct the cock-and-bull story about the contingency plans. His body had ached so abominably that it was impossible to think clearly. He had been confused and now he couldn't be certain exactly what he had told them.

He was only just beginning to remember what he had *meant* to tell them. That the rescuers had an emergency plan to escape by road to the south coast. It was the only thing he could think of. From what the SAS sergeant had told him – or what he *thought* he had told him – it was the most unlikely possibility.

Yet finally the interrogators had seemed satisfied. Someone had interrupted them. Something about a gas-pipe explosion. It was all confirmed.

You can go now. Have your glass of water. May Allah go with you.

Fuck Allah!

Curt felt as though he was coming round from an anaesthetic. Slowly, painfully, he lowered his knees.

Sun shone fiercely in through a barred window in the wall. In the corner of the spartan cell was a bed. Not a straw bundle, but a proper utility metal bedstead with a mattress. Beside it stood a small wooden table with a polythene bowl of water.

With agonising slowness he climbed to his knees. Then, clutching the wall for support, he shakily raised one leg. He didn't trust it to hold out. Using gentle shuffling movements he edged along the wall until he reached the bed.

He lowered himself onto the mattress. Beside him the clothes he had been arrested in had been laid out. On top of them was a small pile of his possessions. A handkerchief, a comb, a pair of sunglasses . . . a wallet. Snatching it up, he peered inside. No money. Only to be expected. No papers or visiting cards. No doubt any poor bastard whose address had been in his wallet would be receiving an unwelcome early morning call.

He thumbed open the back flap Yes! It was there: the photograph of Alison and the two children. He pressed it to his lips. It tasted almost sweet. He realised that he had succeeded. He was still alive. A physical mess perhaps, but he was still alive. After all there was something in the anti-interrogation techniques they had taught him at Langley. They must have learned something during Korea and Vietnam. Not all those young men, whose bodies were wickedly abused, had suffered in vain. Enough had survived to learn from their experiences.

He turned and looked through the window to the walled garden below. Beyond he could see a screen of poplars, and the glimmering surface of the Zayandeh River. It looked peaceful out there. Real. How life used to be.

The door opened with a jolt. He looked up startled as the revolutionary guard stepped in. The man was grinning inanely. "Hey! You nervous? What is your matter, huh? Those bruises! You have an accident?"

Curt said nothing. He just sat with his fists clenched on his knees. He averted his eyes. He was right: now it was going to start all over again.

"You should be more careful, son of Satan," the guard laughed. "Look where you are leaping, yes?"

The American glared at him, but the Iranian just laughed again. "Don't worry, we're not unkind. We look after you good. I get doctor to once you over, eh?"

Curt was puzzled, not knowing what to believe. The guard slouched towards the door. "I bring you tea. No coffee. No Carter's coffee, eh? A drink for evil men. I bring you tea." He wagged a warning finger. "Don't you try no funny business. It be shame to shoot you after you help us. You stay our prisoner but no more questions, eh? You relax. You sleep. Okay?"

Curt echoed in a whisper, "*Okay.*"

"And no salt in the tea, eh?" Chuckling the guard shut and bolted the door.

KERMAN: 1200 hrs, Saturday 20th September

Sergeant Dave Forbes and Hameda arrived at midday in the desert city of Kerman in the middle of a dust storm. The journey in the French-built turbo-train had been comfortable enough, but the strain of talking to ticket collectors and avoiding suspicious revolutionary guards, who took it on themselves to inspect everyone's credentials, proved nerve-fraying.

The vicious sand particles which swirled around them were the last straw, but at least they hid them from prying eyes. Hameda pointed out the blue domes and tiled wind tower around which eddies of sand scurried, but Forbes showed no interest. Even the mirror surfaces of the famous water gardens were shattered by wafts of grit brought in on a

gusting wind. Blooms bowed in the flowerbeds. Above them cypress and pines creaked in protest.

"Is it far?" Forbes demanded, immediately inhaling a mouthful of fine sand.

More wisely Hameda didn't attempt to speak. She merely indicated the side street they were approaching.

He grinned at her. The thought of a few hours' rest, with salted cheese and unleavened bread, was welcome. However, as they turned the corner, the prospect of sanctuary died. Instantly. Hameda froze, but instinctively Forbes ushered her on on, twisting her arm so that she couldn't resist. He almost frog-marched her across to the shabby little tea-house opposite. As a result of his quick reaction, the surly-looking revolutionary guard who was standing outside the gate to her realtives' house, noticed nothing.

The owner of the tea-house was snoozing in the corner. He didn't hear them enter at first, their noise drowned by the gabble of Farsi from the transistor radio. He awoke with a start, evidently not expecting any customers while the dust-storm raged. Sniffing heavily so that his moustache twitched, he ambled across to the window bench where Forbes had parked himself to get a good view of the house opposite.

"Some tea and some food, if you please," he ordered.

The man didn't move. "No women."

Forbes looked up. He had forgotten that women were only reluctantly accepted at wayside tea-houses. Normally the places were a refuge for men, where they could discuss important matters. Mostly about women. Obviously Hameda realised, for she looked decidedly uncomfortable.

"Forgive us!" Forbes grinned broadly and made a show of extracting a fat wallet. "We are taking refuge from this infernal storm and we have travelled far." The man seemed unimpressed. "I see you have no other customers," he added. "And we shall be gone quickly."

"You are from the country?" grunted the owner.

"Yes."

"Obviously," the other replied. "Things are different now in the cities. I can get into trouble for allowing women in here."

"*One* woman," Forbes said smiling, and pointedly placed too much change on the table. "And five minutes."

As the owner shuffled off, the sergeant called him back. "By the way, why are there guards outside that house over there?"

"Last night they come," the man replied. "They take away the man, his wife and three children. They say they are traitors."

"*They?*"

He shrugged. "Everyone. A rich family. Shah-lovers. Bah, they get all they deserve. They never came in here . . ."

He tramped off.

Forbes turned to Hameda. He could only see her eyes in the *chador*, but they told him everything. They were full of despair, and tears were beginning to roll down the sides of her nose. "Now you know why I *must* leave this place," she said hoarsely. "It could be my entire family by now. In Teheran there is my mother, my grandmother, Shirin my sister . . . Davoud . . ."

Forbes stretched across the table and squeezed her arm. "Take courage. And don't jump to conclusions. It serves no purpose. We must concentrate on getting out of the country. There'll be plenty of time then to worry about others."

Her eyes looked suddenly angry. "You are a hard man, Mr. Dave. You sometimes frighten me."

Suddenly she cocked her head to one side, listening.

"What is it?" he asked.

Hameda frowned. "On the radio. A news bulletin." She strained to catch the distorted words from the tiny set on the counter. It needed new batteries. "Something about another American raid. To free their hostages."

"Huh?" Forbes listened, finding difficulty in picking up the rapid flow of Farsi rhetoric. News and patriotic religious comment all in one. Something about a helicopter stolen from Isfahan and a crash. Accusations of a second failure by the Americans.

It had to be Snapdragon. Forbes' heart sank.

"They ask for anyone who sees a strange group of men and

a fair-headed woman to tell police. Somewhere in the Zagros . . . I did not catch the district."

A smile flickered on the sergeant's face. "So they weren't killed in the crash."

"You mean they are not the Americans? They are your people?"

He nodded. "No doubt about it. But I wonder *where* they crashed. They were operating to a tight schedule. It wouldn't take much for them to ruin the pick-up." And, he thought, if the area was swarming with Iranian police, they could hardly allow the RAF Hercules to land.

"Whatever their problems, it does not help us," Hameda said moodily.

Forbes was deep in thought. "Without help getting to Pakistan it *will* be difficult," he admitted.

"Then we give ourselves up?" Her eyes were wide.

Forbes almost choked. "No way! But there's a chance . . . if our team's been delayed, they might well try their contingency plan. Overland to the south coast . . ." He peered through the smeary window . . . "I just wonder if we could make the pick-up."

"By boat? When?"

"Three days from now."

She thought for a moment. "There are no trains south from here. We have to go by bus. But that is risky. Perhaps the time-tables not tie-up. Depending on where we go there may be no buses at all . . ." She hesitated . . . "But what if your friends did leave. And there is no one at the coast?"

Forbes shrugged. "We'll swim." He grinned. "Or steal a fishing boat."

The owner arrived with some white salted cheese and a pancake of unleavened bread. Still glowering, he retreated leaving the sergeant to pour out the fragrant Caspian tea. It was scalding hot.

As he pushed a glass across to her, Hameda watched him curiously, and said: "I expect your friends are missing you?"

"You just bet they are."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

LONDON: 1600 hrs, Saturday 20th September

"Well, ma'am, I thought you'd be pleased to hear . . ." As the Director-General of the Secret Intelligence Service stopped talking, the silence that followed was fragile.

It was a full thirty seconds before the Prime Minister, seated behind the desk of her study in Number 10, replied. Her mind seemed to be far away. "Oh, yes, of course. Thank you, Dickie."

"The last twenty-four hours have been rather nerve-racking," admitted Sir Arthur. "No news can be bad news."

"More nerve-racking for them, I think," she said reproachfully. "And, of course, it isn't exactly good news."

He shifted uncomfortably. "I've every confidence, ma'am, that the contingency plan will work."

"Four days in hostile territory across totally uncompromising terrain . . . I hope your confidence is well-founded, Dickie."

"It is, ma'am," he answered brusquely. "It's what the pilgrims are trained for."

The Prime Minister sat back in her chair and steepled her fingers together. Something was troubling her. "I am still curious about the message from Blake that was included in the transmission. Telling us he knows why we want him out, and warning us not to try to have him assassinated. Doesn't he realise – despite the wilder imaginings of thriller writers – Whitehall doesn't act like the Kremlin."

Sir Arthur smiled gently. "He's no fool. He knows we want him out, and he knows we mean him to keep silent."

The Prime Minister's eyes hardened, belying the polite smile. "There's nothing I don't know about, Dickie, is there?"

"No, ma'am. There is more than one way to shut someone up. No assassination, no lifetime in a mental institution. We just make sure no one will touch his work with a barge pole – in this country anyway. And we have many friends in America and Europe. My people are quite adept at this sort of thing. We merely isolate the subject in the appropriate manner.

"In Blake's case it will be a question of depriving him of his livelihood. Then, when he is beginning to get desperate, we engineer an opening for him. Like a drowning man he will clutch at it. It will be a good job with money he finds difficult to resist. Already we have a job in mind on a newspaper in a socialist African state. Well out of harm's way."

The Prime Minister nodded. Under the circumstances it seemed a good idea.

"What about this mysterious girlfriend?"

"All I know about her is that she is a photo-journalist of some repute. I've already put in hand an investigation. Maybe this African paper also has a vacancy for a picture editor. Either way, ma'am, they'll get no chance to cause trouble."

"See to it, Dickie. A slip-up would be indefensible. If word gets out about this it could lead to my government's fall. And that would be most unwelcome, especially as this whole business was begun by the Foreign Office under a previous administration!"

"Quite so," Sir Arthur replied. He was thankful that he could sense his audience coming to an end. "Rest assured. The Deputy Head of DP2 himself has made a personal request to meet Blake immediately he is out of Iranian territory. To ensure the matter can be dealt with satisfactorily. I have therefore given my consent."

At last the Prime Minister seemed satisfied. "I agree this deserves the attentions of a man of appropriate experience, Dickie. I am grateful. A frightened animal can be dangerous and, you know, Blake sounds very frightened. And that means he is potentially *very* dangerous."

INDIAN OCEAN: 1615 hrs, Saturday 20th September

Even as the Director-General of SIS was concluding his interview at Number 10, a priority coded signal was being flashed from HMS *Warrior*, the Royal Navy's underground operations centre at Northwood. It was received by the commodore aboard the County-class guided missile destroyer that was acting flagship to the three-vessel patrol steaming across the Indian Ocean towards Hong Kong.

Almost immediately a signal was made to the patrol frigate HMS *Antler* which followed behind the Royal Fleet Auxiliary tanker at the end of the line.

On the bridge of *Antler*, Commander Joseph T. Richmond, RN, was surprised to receive the order to break away from the patrol and head back towards the Gulf. He was also delighted. It looked like something interesting was in the wind.

At thirty-five years old he felt he had reached the peak of his career. Even though certain promotion lay ahead, sailing some desk in the dusty corridors of the Admiralty, he knew he would never again experience the exhilaration of commanding a newly-commissioned Type 21 frigate.

His Number One glanced down at the signal paper in the commander's hand.

"Trouble, Sir?"

Richmond looked down over the defiant snout of the 4.5 gun on the foredeck as he waited for the navigation officer to lay the new course. "We're diverting at all speed to the Gulf. We're to pick up a gentleman from the Foreign Office off Salalah. We'll receive further instructions from him."

Number One scratched his nose. "Sounds intriguing. The Gulf is a bit of a hot-spot at the moment."

Richmond gave his colleague a disapproving grunt for his obvious relish at the prospect of some excitement. But secretly he shared the other's enthusiasm.

Number One handed over the calculation. "Set a course bearing 270 degrees. Full ahead," Richmond ordered.

Number One grinned. "Aye, aye, Sir."

As the wake creamed out in a tight semi-circle behind her,

the rakish lines of HMS *Antler* looked breathtakingly sleek, her decks canting and the White Ensign thrashing wildly. By the time she pulled out of the turn and ploughed her nose into the north-westerly, she was already running a business-like twenty-seven knots.

Richmond glanced down at the signal and the name of the man he was to take aboard off the Oman coast.

Ian Ferguson.

At Snapdragon's operational headquarters in Salalah, Captain Johnny Fraser received the message to prepare for 'Operation Salvation' with mixed emotions.

He was not pleased to hear that the fall-back plan had to be implemented, because it meant the team was in difficulty. But, having already been deprived of a participating role in the very first rescue plan, he wasn't sorry to be needed now.

"So they've fucked up?" Sergeant Turner asked. He was a Brummie and an eternal pessimist, especially when it came to the abilities of officers. And with officers from the exalted ranks of the nobility like Hawksby, he considered disaster to be a foregone conclusion.

Fraser decided not to feed the NCO with additional fuel for speculation. "There's no detail how badly. But they're one man light."

"Who?"

"We don't know. But they're bringing out an additional passenger. A woman."

Sergeant Turner shook his head. Nothing could surprise him when aristocrats were involved. "I'll go and get things organised."

The door shut, leaving Fraser alone with his thoughts. Mostly these concerned the risks they were likely to be running. On balance, they should be negligible. That night they would leave in a fast patrol boat of the Sultan of Oman's Navy, commanded by a British officer. They would leave port early so that there would be no obvious connection with any trouble there might be in Iran.

Before dawn in three days' time the patrol boat would drop

them in two fast Rigid Raider assault craft over the horizon and away from the inquisitive ears of Iranian coastal radar. Immediately the Omani Navy boat would melt away and not return to its home port for at least a week.

This was not because of any reticence by the Omanis to get involved. London had determined that there should be no sign of their complicity – if trouble broke out over the pick-up. Having achieved their rendezvous with Snapdragon it would be a British ship that would be conveniently steaming past in the Gulf as the assault craft left Iranian waters.

Captain Johnny Fraser glanced down at the name he had scribbled on his pad.

HMS *Antler*.

The crew of the Iranian Navy anti-submarine Orion aircraft were not happy.

Like armed forces the world over there was fierce rivalry between the services, and the men aboard knew full well that they should be out over the Gulf, patrolling against incursion by Iraqi rebels. Everyone knew that war was imminent, although no one in authority wanted to admit it. Most certainly they knew that they should not be cruising over the Zagros Mountains on instructions from some jumped-up army colonel just because he wanted to make use of their highly-efficient infra-red night sensors.

It should not be allowed. The linescan screen operator watched the image of the mountains pass below him, his eyes flicking over the occasional blob that represented the heat-source of a vehicle moving along a road. There were few of these at this time of night and anyway he had been told to ignore them. Colonel Murad had made it clear that it was vehicles moving *off* the road he was interested in. Surely no one in their right mind would drive across the Zagros Mountains in daylight, let alone night time?

He was therefore astonished when he suddenly detected two tell-tale flickers far from any road, moving steadily southward.

They must be doing thirty miles an hour. Ridiculous.

Nevertheless the operator spoke into the intercom to the pilot. "I think I might have found what we are looking for."

ZAGROS MOUNTAINS: 2355 hrs, Saturday 20th September

Ever since they had broken camp at sunset to continue their journey south, Hawksby had felt an increasing sense of unease.

Perhaps it was the sense of foreboding that the professional soldier acquires over the years. Perhaps it was just battle fatigue, or even an over-active imagination. But it was just before midnight when he had confirmation that everything was not well.

Pogo Penaia had been negotiating Panther Two down a steep escarpment like a rider in a point-to-point, when his uncannily acute ears picked up the sound of an aircraft. The Land Rover engine had been almost idling at the time and the Fijian cocked his head to one side. Immediately he switched off the ignition. As the quietness swelled up around them, all eyes turned skywards. They tried to locate the source of the steady droning noise but the sky appeared empty.

They stopped twice more during the next hour. Each time the noise was still there – distant, muted, but strangely menacing.

"What you reckon, boss?" Pogo asked.

Hawksby shook his head slowly. "It's a turbo-prop job, I reckon. Heavy transport."

"You t'ink t'ey follow us?" Eva asked with alarm.

"It could be a coincidence," Blake suggested.

"I don't hold much with coincidence," Hawksby replied.

John Belcher leaned forward. "A reconnaissance patrol. Got to be." He added pointedly: "It's been with us on and off for the past sixty minutes. Maybe a Hercules."

"Not that sound." Pogo was insistent. They'd all been doing their homework.

"Then it's got to be an Orion," Hawksby decided.

"What's t'at?" Eva asked.

"A maritime patrol aircraft," Belcher explained. "They operate out of Bushehr in the west. They can track in the dark using infra-red. Not as effective overland, but in open terrain like this we'll show up like a boil on a bum." He grinned. "Sorry."

Hawksby reached for the radio. "I'll warn Scottie. But we've no option but to push on. Step on it, Pogo, will you. If we lose contact with Panther One, we'll really be up shit creek."

The Land Rover lurched forward, its growl swamping out the sound of the aircraft.

Putting himself in the position of the Iranians, Hawksby felt sure that the net was closing in. His diversionary tactics of the night before had worked well, but obviously the pursuers were not stupid. The likely presence of an Orion proved that. Once they were pin-pointed, it was just a question of time before the Iranians moved units up and sealed them off, like pieces on a gigantic chess board. Moving across country undetected, the SAS team held the initiative but once located, the Iranians had the advantage of helicopter mobility.

It was time for another navigational stop. Tiger had to take three star-sightings with the sextant, using a chronometer for precise timings. The slightest error and, by morning, they could be up to thirty miles off course. In mountain country the problems were compounded by the need to establish the angle of each star to the horizon, and the vehicle altimeter was notoriously unreliable.

Grimly Hawksby recognised there was absolutely nothing he could do except hope: hope that, despite his certainty to the contrary, the aircraft had not actually located them. And hope that they could fight their way out of any trouble. They just didn't have the time to go to ground.

Once Tiger was satisfied the two vehicles set off again. They were entering the flat-open mouth of a wadi, the sides of which began to rise more sharply with every mile they travelled. From the JARIC map they knew that eventually the walls would tower above them until the dried-up river bed narrowed to form a deep cleft in the mountain. Leading

from that apex was a tortuous shingle track that wound up to higher ground. If they got that far. Like the infamous canyons beloved of Hollywood Apaches, it was an ideal place for an ambush.

In other circumstances Hawksby would have progressed with caution, sending reconnaissance squads along the top of each wall of the wadi. However there was no time to allow for such luxuries.

He discussed the dangers briefly with McDermid on the radio. The Scotsman didn't say much, but he was clearly concerned at the news of the persistent air patrol. They hadn't heard it, but they were well aware that danger could be imminent.

"There'll be more cover once we're out o' this wadi," McDermid said. *"We'll press on a wee bit faster. Out."*

Eva leaned forward as Hawksby finished his conversation. "What iss it, Alan. T'ere iss more trouble?"

Hawksby knew his voice lacked confidence. "No sign of activity ahead, so don't worry. It would take them some time to muster troops and dispatch helicopters."

"But t'at aeroplane iss been over'ead for at least an 'our."

He was suddenly aware of the closeness of her face to his. She was holding his gaze. In the darkness the whites of her eyes seemed large. Clear and bright. He tried to pick up the thread of their talk. Distracted, he said: "Yes. An hour is long enough. But we're still some distance away from any main base."

Hawksby began to feel uncomfortable and turned away, aware that he had revealed his interest in her. He could feel her shoulder rubbing against his as the vehicle bumped and thudded over the rough ground.

As she sat back in her seat, he felt himself relax. He must be getting old, he told himself. Earlier Scottie had jibed at him about Eva Olsen. He'd noticed her watching the major and had reported his observation. But behind the mischievous good humour, Hawksby realised that the corporal was firing a warning shot. He did not want their leader so besotted with one of their charges that it impaired his judgment.

On reflection he had to admit there was a fascination

about the girl. It would be surprising if there wasn't. She exuded animal sex-appeal like few women he had ever come across. His own wife Caroline was another, but he had already learned to his cost that it was a mixed blessing. It didn't necessarily cement a relationship.

He also recognised a quality in Eva that Caroline didn't possess. The Norwegian had a refreshing self-confidence that appealed to him. An air of determination and ruthlessness. It made Caroline, with her aristocratic disinterest and cultivated graces, seem as shallow and superficially beautiful as everything else about Greshmile Manor.

After years abroad in the Army, especially in the Middle East, he had slowly but surely begun to reject so-called 'civilised' society. Soft and diluted, it hardly compared with the harsh realities of life in the Gulf. There he'd been completely absorbed by the local languages, customs and way of life where everything was second in importance to water. Even in Iran, where he had spent so much time as a British adviser to the Iranian Army on armoured warfare tactics, water came first. Then food and procreation. Medicine and education came a poor third. Life there was raw, basic. *Real.*

Idly he wondered if he was being fair to Caroline. She could hardly be blamed for her own heritage. If only she'd *seen* more of the world, perhaps she'd understand how much there was to be done . . .?

"*One te Two!*" McDermid's voice was urgent.

Shaken from his thoughts, Hawksby switched on the mike. "Two. Send. Over . . .?"

The reply was drowned by the thudding crescendo of a helicopter. It emerged suddenly over the rim of the wadi. Coming from downwind, its approach had been muted.

Simultaneously, gun flashes blinked from the high side of the river bed on the right. The noise rumbled back and forth, sounding like a distant avalanche, interspersed with whip-cracks of lightning. The heavy throb of the helicopter's twin rotors filled the air so that the very ground seemed to tremble. Then it disappeared over the right-hand wall of the wadi.

Fountains of dust sprayed up around Panther Two as a hail of shells stitched crazy patterns along the parched river bed. A second bank of muzzle flashes came from high up on the left as more rifle-fire poured into the wadi. Half-a-dozen rounds glanced off the vehicle's bodywork, the guns evidently fired from near maximum range.

Hawksby squinted forward, anticipating the presence of an enemy stop-group ahead. He was not to be disappointed. The stammer of the belt-fed machine gun and its infantry support came with a tell-tale flicker of flame that was spread like a winking necklace in the darkness before them.

Natural reaction in such circumstances is to dive desperately for cover. It is also a fatal reaction. While the victim is stunned and stricken with surprise, the attacker can pour in concentrated fire. Or close in. There are few ways to break an ambush. One is to pull back, fast. The other is to push straight on into it at all speed, and keep going. Regardless of casualties.

Countless hours of reaction-training made the Snapdragon team instinctively move as one to confound the Iranians. Seconds only had passed before Pogo had stabbed the smoke-button on the steering-wheel hub. Instantly both rear and forward smoke discharge ignited, hurling the L7 grenades forward and backwards in a defensive fan. They burst on impact, green smoke blossoming to blot out the landscape.

As Panther Two leapt forward into the protective fog, Belcher had yanked Eva and Blake to the floor below the vehicle's sidewalls. Already Hawksby had swung into action with the forward-facing twin-mounted GPMGs prising back the cocking handle of the machine gun in one practised movement. He readied himself for the breakthrough as the Land Rover lurched wildly into the curtain of smoke.

Then they were clear. Ahead, the wadi basin was illuminated in the harsh glare of an Iranian flare, creating the unreal quality of a science fiction movie set. Panther One was already racing at the enemy stop-group who had dug themselves in to form a line across the river bed. Sand clouds

drifted everywhere. He saw Perkis swing the wheel to give his vehicle an unpredictable course.

McDermid was half-standing in the front passenger seat, crouching over their machine gun. Its long nose was spitting fire as wafts of cordite streamed in its wake. In the rear compartment, Kangers Webster hammered away with his L37 at positions on the left.

Instinctively Hawksby winced as he saw McDermid's Land Rover drive directly over one of the Iranian troopers. The man had no time to dig more than a shell-scrape in the hard-baked earth, and the heavy forward sand-tyre ground remorselessly into his belly as the vehicle struggled to get a grip. The SAS team's head-on attack had thrown the enemy completely. As Panther One surged past the machine gunner, the Iranian stood up, bewildered. He was obviously terrified that he would now be under attack from both sides at once. He was.

As Panther Two followed up, Hawksby blew him full of holes with a short burst from the GPMG. He then laced the remaining positions with a prolonged burst. Two Iranian guns fell silent.

The last remaining soldier climbed to his feet and began racing towards the side of the wadi. Pogo saw him and swung the wheel. The wing of Panther Two caught the man square in the base of the spine, carrying him forward like a ship's figurehead.

The body rolled away and Panther Two accelerated after McDermid into the shadows of the wadi.

"Christ!" breathed Blake, raising his head.

John Belcher unceremoniously pushed it down. "Keep the old arse-up position, Jonathan, there's a good chap. We're not out of this yet."

Hawksby snatched a fresh ammunition box from one of the side-bins. Hurriedly he broke the seal and ripped open the lid, then fed a new belt into the GPMG breech.

ISFAHAN: 0300 hrs, Sunday 21st September

Although everyone in Iran had been expecting it, the news of the Iraqi invasion still came as a shock. Colonel Najaf Murad was no exception. As is the way of such things, official confirmation came at the most unexpected and unwelcome time. It had been the first time he had been able to snatch a few hours to himself since the journalist Blake had been snatched two days ago.

From that time he had survived on catnaps and the effects of exhaustion had increased until he no longer felt able to go on without at least four successive hours' sleep. He had managed to blackmail – quite literally, by putting pressure on an Iranian vice-admiral who had a penchant for teenage sailors – the naval authorities into giving him use of an Orion patrol aircraft. Then he had a detachment of *real* soldiers, not revolutionary guards, on standby with a heavy helicopter, under the command of a competent officer.

Having set his plan in motion, he had returned to his new smart apartment in Isfahan and the tender mercies of a high-class whore who had virtually lived with him back in Teheran.

Too tired to exert himself he had lain back on cool silk sheets, his mind a blissful blank whilst she had ministered to him. The expertise of her mouth and tongue had awakened his tired body, and then she had gently bored herself onto him in a series of slow, delicious movements. He felt the life force in him begin to move inexorably upward.

And then the bedside telephone began to shriek.

Wearily Murad stretched out and picked up the receiver. He signalled the girl to stop but, mischievously, she refused. Watching him with an impish smile, she reduced her pumping motion to a tantalising slowness.

The Iraqi offensive had begun in the early hours of the morning, the voice said. It was fractured with suppressed panic. The artillery duel which had been rumbling all summer across the border had erupted into a fierce, prolonged exchange. Armour was moving up. So was infantry. Assault

bridging equipment and boats. Aircraft were in combat. Teheran was being hit by Iraqi MiGs.

Murad was dumbfounded. He could even discern the rumble of exploding bombs on the other end of the line.

Still the girl worked at him, now increasing the momentum.

The Orion maritime aircraft had been recalled by the Navy. All front-line troops were needed immediately. There, at the front-line itself, not charging after phantoms in the middle of the Zagros Mountains. If he wanted to continue his search, he would have to make use of local revolutionary guards. More bombs sounded in the background.

Murad was furious. But his stormy reply was interrupted by the excruciating sensation as his loins exploded. Momentarily he forgot his words.

Angrily he pushed the whore aside and swung his legs off the bed.

He shook the receiver. The telephone line from Teheran to Isfahan had gone dead.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Panther One appeared ahead at the apex of the wadi. It had begun to work its way up the track of stone debris to a higher level.

Pogo changed down gear and prepared to follow.

"Chopper!" Belcher yelled, swinging round the rear GPMG on its pintle mounting.

Hawksby looked up. It was the transport helicopter again. The giant Chinook disappeared over the wadi wall to disgorge more troops. Belcher loosed off a short burst, but the angle of elevation was too high. Panther Two began to rock from side to side like a boat in a heavy swell as Pogo followed the first Land Rover over the scree and onto the track. The veins in his forearms stood out like gnarled roots as he struggled with the wheel. His face glistened and his shirt was black with sweat. The white grin was fixed with determination.

Above, Hawksby could see shadowy figures scrambling over the lip of the wadi near where the helicopter had settled. He tried to count the bobbing shapes against the paler skyline. He reckoned three but couldn't be sure. Belcher had a better angle of fire with his machine gun, but the rocking motion of the vehicle threw his aim.

It took an age to crawl up the track, inching along.

"For God's sake, Pogo," Hawksby hissed. "Put your bloody foot down!"

The Fijian was unmoved. "It's better to arrive safe than never . . ." he said through gritted teeth. Hawksby grinned despite himself and dropped back into the seat. There was nothing more that he could do. However, now the small group of Iranian troopers had gained the advantage of height and, perched behind the protection of a rocky shelf overlook-

ing the track, they posed an even greater threat. More muzzle flashes cut through the darkness, and an arc of fire swept over the two Panthers. Bullets twanged loudly on metalwork. Glass shattered.

Two dull *phut*-like detonations came from beneath Panther Two. The right side of the vehicle dropped sickeningly as though the suspension had collapsed An empty ammunition case dislodged and spun over the track. It disappeared noisily down the sheer drop into the wadi.

"Shit!" Hawksby swore. "Bloody tyres!"

Belcher's calm voice belied how he felt. "Time to abandon ship, I think." He grabbed Blake's arm. "C'mon, get to cover!"

Hawksby leapt into the rear compartment and seized Eva, hauling her roughly after him into the tight gap between the side of the vehicle and the wadi wall. More shells studded the earth above their heads, dislodging a shower of grit and stones. Hawksby lowered his Uzi sub-machine gun in disgust. He'd need more than that to shift the Iranians from their nest. They were shielded by rock, and even the heavy fire pouring from Panther One was having no noticeable effect.

Someone needed to gain a height advantage over them, but that wasn't going to be easy. The hail of fire was murderous if inaccurate. At least they didn't have night-sights. But still it would be impossible to root them out. Unless . . .

"Eva, that storage bin above your head," he said breathlessly. "Small grenades with fins."

She looked blank, her mouth agape with panic.

"Grenades! Quick, girl!"

Getting a grip of herself, she suddenly jolted into action, and peered into the side-bin. She extracted something. "T'ese?"

"Yes. And keep your pretty bloody head down," he snapped. "Or else it'll be just that." He grabbed the grenade from her and fitted it into the snout of the Uzi. Aiming high above the Iranians' position on the ledge, he squeezed the trigger.

The grenade hurtled skyward, lost in the blackness. Moments later it blew just below the ledge.

"Damn," he cursed. "Falling short. Just hasn't got the range. Still, it's given them something to think about."

The grenade did not keep the Iranians thinking for long. Another prolonged raking burst bit into the track and drilled into the bodywork of Panther Two. Hawksby flinched as dust and metal splinters lanced the air. Eva, petrified, pushed hard against him for protection, burying her head against his chest. He ruffled her hair consolingly. His eyes never left the ledge. They were well and truly pinned down.

Suddenly a fresh rattle of automatic weapons seemed to come from nowhere, but there was no mistaking where the deadly fire was being aimed. Shots from the Iranians on the ledge came to an abrupt halt. Clouds of dust swirled away from the position under the torrent of lead. Farther up the track Panther One's machine guns stopped. Only now it was possible to tell from where the surprise attack had come.

Hawksby glanced upward, wondering for a moment if one of McDermid's patrol had managed to scale the wadi to gain height over the ledge. He frowned.

"What iss it?" Eva asked breathlessly. The relief of the unexpected lull in the attack had affected her nerves. She began to tremble uncontrollably, as though in a fever.

Hawksby put his arm around her shoulder, as the crackle of gunfire died. "Kalashnikovs," he decided.

"What?" Eva's face was wet with perspiration.

"You can tell by the sound. Kalashnikovs. Not ours."

Belcher wriggled to him along the narrow gap. "I thought it might be Scottie," he said. "But you're right. They're Kalashnikovs, no danger."

Hawksby didn't need the confirmation. He'd heard too many of the Russian guns fired at him in anger by the Communist rebels in Oman to have any doubts. He reached for the Starlight 'scope in the passenger compartment and studied the ledge. There was no sign of life. Just a thin white hand protruding over the edge in a frozen farewell wave.

Then the shattering explosion came. It was a *whooshing* roar that rushed skyward in a giant spurt of flame above the

lip of the wadi. One of the rotors of the Chinook helicopter came scything in slow-motion over the top like a gigantic boomerang. Whistling past them, the blade thudded upright into the floor of the wadi.

Belcher watched, fascinated. "Looks like bloody Excalibur."

Hawksby switched on his Pocketfone mike. "Scottie, for Christ's sake what's happening up there?"

"I dunna ken, boss," came the reply. *"A bunch o'peasants jest emerged from nowhere. Armed te the bleddy teeth. May be Kurdish tribesmen – anyhow they're irregular. All I ken is they've made mincemeat o' them Persians. An' jest blown the chopper into one giant monkey-puzzle. Over."*

Hawksby flipped the switch. "Watch 'em, Scottie and keep your guard up until we find out what their game is. I'll be right with you."

The major climbed to his feet and helped Eva out of the cramped space. She brushed the short fringe away from her brow. "T'ank you, Alan." She smiled nervously. Then, before he realised, she reached up and kissed him quickly on the mouth.

"Hey, this isn't the time, boss . . ." Belcher said indignantly.

Hawksby flushed, stepping quickly back from the girl. Pogo was watching with a quizzical expression on his face.

"Forget it!" the major muttered, embarrassed.

"I iss really grateful," Eva said. "You save my life."

"Give it a rest, Eva." It was Blake who was the last to emerge from behind Panther Two. "You'll give the major ideas above his station."

Hawksby turned to Pogo. "Stay with 'em here, and don't let them out of your sight. John, come with me."

Belcher picked his Remington pump-action shotgun from the vehicle and set off up the track after Hawksby, who was disappearing from view, the Uzi ready for use.

"You have luck, my friend!" the big man boomed, chuckling as he rolled strands of tobacco into a liquorice paper. The small donkey he sat on emphasised his large frame. His bare

feet only just cleared the ground. Although the heavy Kalashnikov was still cradled across his forearms, it didn't interfere with the expert way he made the cigarette.

Hawksby shifted impatiently. Behind the big man stood three more donkeys. Each carried another tribesman, all in patterned woollen hats and tattered robes under well-worn sheepskin coats. And three more Kalashnikovs.

"Peace be upon you," Hawksby said warily in Farsi. He kept the Uzi pointing downward, just. He was aware that the stranger was weighing up the situation, but he had no desire to stand around exchanging niceties with renegade tribesmen who looked as though they'd sell their own grandmothers for a leg of mutton. Or another Kalashnikov. "I am in your debt, *agha*," he added.

In the quiet mountain landscape, the man's volcanic laugh sounded unnaturally loud. "Quite *so*, my friend! Quite *so*!"

He stuck the thin cigarette into the mass of tangled beard and cupped his hands as he lit a match. He coughed heavily, exhaling a pungent cloud of obnoxious smoke. Again he chuckled. "But you owe us nothing, soldier boy. You owe us nothing. It is a pleasure to help anyone who runs from the infidels of Qum!"

Hawksby's eyes narrowed. "You are Qashquai?" He was sure this giant and his motley crew were members of the nomadic shepherd tribes of the southern Zagros.

The man's eyes seemed to brighten. "Ah, then you have been to this district before, eh? Not a city dweller, eh?"

"You have no sheep with you?" It was a statement more than a question. Hawksby remembered that the Qashquai took their sheep up into the mountain pastures during the summer. Now, with the onset of autumn, they should be on their way back to the villages on the lower slopes with their flocks.

Carefully the man extracted some loose tobacco from the end of his cigarette with his teeth and spat it on the ground. It landed just before Hawksby's feet. "You ask many questions, stranger. That is not polite."

Hawksby's face was a mask. "If two strangers do not ask questions, then they will always be strangers."

For a moment there was tension in the air like an electrical charge. The moon came out from behind the clouds, its cold light glinting on the Persian's eyes. The three tribesmen behind him shifted on their donkeys.

Suddenly the man's laugh filled the air. "I see I have met a wise man! A man as wise as me!" In a sudden movement he kicked his left leg high over the donkey's head and allowed himself to slide from the animal's back.

"I am Mashallaha," he extended a hand. Hawksby shook it. It was like a paw, hard, calloused and twice the size of his own. The man's eyes fixed on the major's. "Now, so we do not remain strangers. I ask a question, eh? You are supporters of the Reza Shah? Why else do you flee from the Imam's infidels?"

Hawksby thought quickly. This man Mashallaha was unlikely to extend hospitality to any representative of authority, from either the late Shah's or Khomeini's new regime. Perhaps though, in Persia, there was still honour among thieves.

"We support no one. We want to be free men."

"Ah!" bellowed Mashallaha in triumph. "Deserters!"

Hawksby's expression didn't change. "We had a disagreement with our commanding officer."

The big man's beard cracked open to reveal a smile of decayed teeth. "Then you come to the right place. Here you can be free and we can put your vehicles to excellent use . . ." His voice tailed off.

He stepped closer to Panther One. He squinted. "A very unusual jeep, soldier boy. *Very* unusual. I do not see anything like this before. Very impressive. Dangerous. Veritably dangerous!"

McDermid still stood by the L37 GPMG. His finger closed slowly round the trigger.

"Your men," Mashallaha said. "They come from a deaf and dumb regiment? They don't say much!"

Just as well, thought Hawksby. Although they all knew a few sentences of Farsi, Forbes had been the only other fluent speaker in the team. And Perkis' Persian had to be heard to be believed.

"You like us give you some help?" Mashallaha directed his question straight at McDermid.

The Scotsman looked blank. He paused, then said: "*Hali-i shuma khube.*"

Hawksby winced. *How are you?* The idiot had got his phrases mixed up. Mashallaha frowned. The thick Glaswegian drawl dumbfounded him so much that it didn't register what had he said.

"Cleft palate," Hawksby said quickly. "From birth."

Mashallaha shook his head in dismay. "Today they take anyone in the Iranian Army! God save us!"

Although their transport helicopter had been destroyed, the Iranian detachment responsible for the ambush was not many miles behind. Even if they followed on foot, time for Hawksby's team was fast running out. Had it not been for the fortuitous arrival of the Qashquai brigands the operation would have been in serious jeopardy.

Panther Two had lost two tyres and McDermid's vehicle one. Both were precariously placed on the shifting shingle track, just a few feet from a sheer drop. However it was the resigned labours of the four donkeys that proved to be the real godsend. As an ex-Gurkha, Tiger had a lot of experience using the beasts in difficult terrain. But it took him some time to improvise harnesses to which tackle could be attached for hauling the Land Rovers onto solid, level ground.

The tribesmen themselves were worse than useless. Mashallaha sat on a boulder, smoking, coughing and laughing at the others as they tried to obey his contradictory directions. Only one of them, the thinnest, seemed willing to break sweat. The other two just made it look good with a lot of grunts and complaints. After a hot and exhausting twenty minutes, the SAS team went to work like a Formula One pit-stop crew, changing and repairing the wheels.

Hawksby and McDermid checked for other damage. Miraculously the only communications equipment damaged was the long-range Skywave set in Panther One, but this was duplicated in the major's vehicle. A couple of headlamps

were shattered, but the bulbs were easily replaced and the lenses patched over with tape.

Most worrying was that there was now only one spare tyre between the two vehicles, and that was of dubious value as it too had been hit and now had a heavily-patched inner tube. Luck more than anything else would hold the thing together. The special water jacket on Panther Two, which was attached to the radiator on the outside, had been ripped beyond repair. Not only was the refrigeration effect lost, meaning probable overheating in the daylight desert driving conditions, but most of the water in the cooling system had been lost. By the time this was replaced, the team's water supply was down to an uncomfortably low level.

"You have women in your army, eh?"

Mashallaha's words jolted Hawksby from his concentration on repairs. Dressed in fatigues like everyone else and in darkness, he had not thought Eva would have been recognised as female. He had briefed everyone to treat her as though she were a man, until they were away from the Qashquai. Indeed she had determined to prove herself as useful as any of the others and now had a liberal coating of grease on her face and forearms.

But Hawksby realised it was hopeless to deny it. As she laboured with Perkis over the tyre levers to complete the repair, the over-large fatigue top revealed a gaping cleavage. Even in the moonlight, the provocative swing of her breasts as she worked was unmistakable.

Before Hawksby could reply, Mashallaha said: "When I served with the army, I do not remember women soldiers. Times have really changed! If I thought there were women now, I might even join up again!" His laughter petered out, his moist brown eyes becoming suddenly hard and cold. "But somehow I do not see our beloved Imam allowing it." He glanced around at the men at work. "And I do not recall having seen uniforms quite like yours before . . . And your vehicles! They are battleships of the desert . . . Remarkable!"

"We're a special unit . . ." Hawksby began, but he knew he sounded unconvincing. "See the insignia on the wing . . ."

"Ah, yes. Very good. Very good." Mashallaha laughed. "I

have the tattoo of an eagle on my arm, but it doesn't make me a damnable American! In fact, it is just the sort of trick Iraqi infiltrators use . . .!"

It was Blake who alerted the others. They had all begun to notice the changing tone of Mashallaha's Farsi gabble, but it was the journalist who strode forward to add weight to Hawksby's story.

"You talk like a mouse-eater, you infamous felon!" he challenged, insulting the Qashquai by suggesting he was an Arab. "Are you so dishonourable yourself that you cannot even recognise an honourable soldier when you see one?"

Hawksby stepped back in amazement. It was a valiant effort. It almost worked. He could see the doubt flashing in the Persian's eyes; then again they fell upon Eva as though to confirm his first suspicions.

"You stay and fight with us," he demanded, "or we keep your vehicles and the woman!"

Blake hesitated. He noticed that the three other tribesmen had stopped helping and were moving slowly back to join their leader. Slowly, very slowly, Kalashnikovs were being slipped off shoulders. Smiles took on a noticeably fixed expression. Blake was aware that Hawksby's hand was inching towards the Browning pistrol strapped to his hip. From its position on Mashallaha's lap, it took only a split second for the muzzle of the tribesman's rifle to swing towards the major. Moonlight glinted on the curve of its magazine. Blake held his breath.

Hawksby knew the Persian was too close. Rule Number One: if you are armed, never get within arm's reach of an opponent. And Mashallaha was still seated.

As the major's left hand dropped to brush the barrel aside, his right struck with the speed of a snake, its edge catching Mashallaha full in the mouth. The Persian toppled backwards from his perch on the boulder. The Kalashnikov spun to the ground.

Mashallaha had fallen heavily and awkwardly onto the iron-hard ground, but he recovered almost immediately. For a moment Blake thought he was dazed, then suddenly realised that the Persian was extracting a revolver from

inside his sheepskin coat. The journalist turned to warn Hawksby, but the major had found the flap stud of his holster jammed.

Hawksby looked up, realising he should have followed up immediately and killed the Persian by hand. As the snub-muzzled revolver was raised, he knew he had left it too late.

Mashallaha yanked at the trigger. Blinded by the sudden flash, Hawksby dropped to his knees. The Qashquai aimed again.

A Kalashnikov thundered into action, a wild zig-zag of shots raining furiously around the Persian's body. Several slammed into it, causing the torso to jerk involuntarily, shifting it along the ground for several inches.

Two of the other tribesmen lifted their weapons, but the full blast of Kangers' pump-action shotgun caught the first full in the face, taking it out like an eraser over a pencil sketch. As he fell dead the second reeled away, clutching his ear, desperately trying to stick it back onto the side of his head. Just as he began screaming, another 1oz slug blasted a fist-sized hole in his upper chest. The third man, paled, turned and fled.

Kangers Webster glanced at Hawksby. Reluctantly the major nodded, and averted his eyes as the third round slammed into the back of the running man.

The silence that followed was stunning in its intensity.

Blake, stunned, lowered the Kalashnikov that had saved Hawksby's life.

"Thanks, Jonathan."

Shaken back to reality, Blake opened his hands and let the weapon drop as though it had scalded him. For a second he studied it, mesmerised, then looked up at the quartet of corpses. He turned to face Hawksby. "Don't thank me, you fucking bastard. It was an impulse to save us both. It wasn't meant to let your soddin' execution squad go into action."

Hawksby's cheeks pinched. "Stow that sort of talk, Jonathan. It had to be done. It's not pleasant."

"Bullshit!" Blake snapped. "You didn't have to kill them all. The Australian didn't have to shoot that poor bastard in the back."

Kangers shouldered his Remington. "If the sod had had the guts to fight, he'd have been shot in the belly. It was his choice."

"Drop the wisecracks," Hawksby warned. He turned back to Blake. "It was my decision and it was based on orders to get you back in one piece. We're not going to do that if we leave a trail of witnesses behind us. Security must come first."

"Don't quote your fucking military jargon at me. You're just a cold-blooded thug dressed up in a uniform that makes you think you're God-all-fucking mighty!"

Hawksby's eyes narrowed. Quietly he said: "And just you remember it, Jonathan. Just you remember it."

Blake's eyes burned with anger. "Oh, I'll remember all right. I'll remember enough to see you cashiered when we get out of this!"

He turned on his heel and left Hawksby to study the scene of carnage. The men had started to clear up. Hawksby smarted. It was impossible to explain to a man like Blake that 'operational requirements' did, on mercifully rare occasions, dictate that even innocent parties sometimes must be killed. It was nothing to do with maliciousness or bloodlust. It was quite simply the age-old question of them or us, and on clandestine operations the principle had to be extended from an immediate enemy to the remotest threat to a mission's security. Blake would never understand that. Sometimes Hawksby found it hard to accept it himself. It left a bitter after-taste. He stooped to pick up the Kalashnikov. As he did so he felt a hand on his arm. The fingers were warm against his skin.

"I understand," she said. "I can see t'e 'urt in your eyes. But I'm t'ankful you do what 'af to be done." She smiled. "I seem just lately to be saying t'ank you a lot."

Hawksby turned to tell her to leave him alone. He was in no mood for soft words of consolation from anyone, even Eva Olsen.

But, when he looked down into the wide, blue eyes, his anger melted. He knew then that he wanted her.

Slowly he turned and began hurrying the others in their preparations to leave.

ISFAHAN: 0500 hrs, Sunday 21st September

After the initial shock of the invasion news, Colonel Murad had moved fast. Using the temporary communications breakdown between Teheran and Isfahan base, he had contacted his aide with the ambush party in the Zagros.

He listened dispassionately to the news of the encounter and the loss of the transport helicopter. Mentally he dismissed the bad news. Far more important was the fact that contact had been made, even though his quarry had managed to break through the trap.

The mysterious snatch squad was still moving south, seemingly unstoppable. This was the confirmation he needed. They had to be making for a coastal rendezvous. He instructed his aide to commandeer local transport, but to avoid all contact with other military units. Only one radio was to be retained, netted to Murad's personal frequency. That way the High Command in Teheran would be unable to contact the men at all, let alone order them to the front.

"You smile," the whore said as he replaced the receiver.

Murad allowed himself a chuckle. "The idiots in the Revolutionary Council are mere beginners, my dear. I have been in this game a long time."

She allowed her naked breasts to swing towards him provocatively. "Come back to bed. It is nearly dawn."

"In a minute. And then it will be to *sleep*." He smiled as she pouted in feigned disappointment. "But first I must get reinforcements for my ambush party."

He dialled again and after a few moments an agitated voice came on the other end of the emergency military line to the General Staff. "Colonel Murad of SAVAMA here. Special security unit attached to the Revolutionary Council. I have highly-classified intelligence reports concerning an attempted landing of Iraqi infiltrators on the south coast. I must have a company of crack troops at my disposal with helicopter support and naval elements."

"Impossible!" crackled the voice at the other end. "Our units are falling back along the front! We have nothing to spare!"

"Do you want to be falling back from the south coast, as well, my brother? Do you want saboteurs to add to your worries?"

"I said it is impossible."

"Do you know," Murad said quietly, "that I am authorised to act on the personal instructions of the Imam himself?"

The man hesitated, a new respect creeping into his voice. "No, *agha*, I did not know."

"You may check with the Imam himself if you wish." Murad knew it was only partly true; mobilising troops and warships were *slightly* out of his jurisdiction. But equally he knew that the man at the other end would never dare to speak direct to the Imam or even the Council. Anyway, Murad's name was well-known and feared in military circles.

The voice was resigned. "Tell me what you require?"

KERMAN – BANDAR ABBAS ROAD: 0700 hrs, Sunday 21st September

Just what the hell was going on? Instinctively Forbes' hand closed around the stubby shape of one of the Ingrams he had in the travel-bag on his lap. There was no apparent reason for the bus suddenly to stop dead on a clear desert road heading south-west from Kerman. Beside him he felt Hameda tense.

The passengers looked expectant as the young bearded driver clambered out of his seat, waving a transistor radio above his head and shouting. His unruly mop of black hair added to the air of hysteria. Instantly the whole bus was in uproar, with people climbing to their feet and mouthing curses and obscenities to anyone who would listen. Amid the chaos, Forbes had found it difficult to catch what their driver had said. "A news broadcast on the radio," Hameda explained, "says the Iraqis have attacked. Iran has been invaded."

"Infidels!" bawled a peasant farmer at Forbes.

Forbes was stunned by the turn of events. "The sons of Satan," he agreed, hoping this would satisfy the passenger. It seemed to work. Muttering that the Iraqi president was a

vampire and an atheist, he moved down the gangway to begin a heated argument with the driver.

Hameda glanced at Forbes. "What is happening to my country, Mr. Dave?"

The sergeant looked out at the early sunlight. "It's paying the price for international anarchy. While this country's in such a mess, you can expect enemies to try and take advantage."

"It is a terrible wicked world."

Forbes sat back in his seat. He laughed without humour. "It is indeed . . . But this might just work to our advantage."

Hameda looked puzzled.

"It might just help to take the heat off us."

At last the passengers settled down and the driver began again with a jolt. He was anxious to get to the next town so that he could volunteer to repel the invaders.

ZAGROS: 0800 hrs, Sunday 21st September

Despite the incident with the Qashquai brigands, the Snapdragon team had made good progress. The route, which threaded through a series of valleys in the Zagros range, had been kind to them.

As the first spread of dawning light rose in the east, at least they were another forty-five miles nearer their objective. They were in the midst of bare desert mountainside some twelve miles north-east of the town of Nurabad.

There was virtually no vegetation and very little cover of any sort. Jim Perkis led the two-vehicle convoy onto a north-facing slope that offered the protection of shadow and pulled up tight alongside a high overhang of fawn rock. It was here that the Panthers' bizarre pink camouflage should come into its own; there was nothing else between them and the inquisitive eyes of any overflying pilot.

They discovered that Panther One had sustained damage to one of its petrol tanks during the firefight with the Iranian ambush party. Thankfully it had not been a direct hit; a metal fragment had punctured it and petrol had been weep-

ing steadily away since the incident. In the darkness it had been overlooked.

With this problem weighing on his mind, Hawksby had stolen away from the rest of the party and clambered down the six hundred feet to where a stream trickled fitfully over a stony bed. At his approach, a viper slinked away. It wriggled from side to side for a moment and vanished, sinking beneath the sand. Gone except for one evil black eye, like a small pebble, which continued to watch him.

Hawksby sat in the shade of an ancient footbridge. He eased off the Para jump boots which he wore without socks and sank his feet into the water.

"So t'is iss where t'e bossman come to get away from it all?"

He had been unaware of Eva's approach. Careless, he told himself. "Come in the shade. Then you can't be seen from the air."

She obeyed, moving under the bridge. "Don't you effer relax?"

"You can't afford to. We're only allowed one mistake."

"True." She smiled. "You iss clever to find water. I'm filt'y after all t'at driving and trying to wash in a t'imble of water your corporal allow us. Look at my 'air . . ." She laughed. "Or rat'er don't!"

It crossed his mind how Caroline would have reacted to having her hair shorn. Or having had to go days without washing. He decided a compliment would be appreciated. "It's growing. Anyway, it suits you short."

She held his gaze for a moment, a suppressed smile causing dimples in her cheeks. "You lie very beautiful. But I really do not need it."

Without a word she began to unbutton her fatigue top, and slipped it from her shoulders. The stark whiteness of her thin body in the gloom of the bridge arch whipped at his senses. Seemingly oblivious to him, she scooped up water in her cupped hands and splashed it on her body. He watched mesmerised as the water cascaded down between her small breasts.

"T'at iss better," she said and put the shirt back over her

wet torso, not bothering with the buttons. Then she seemed to notice him watching. "I'af make you uncomfortable? I am sorry, I do not t'ink."

Was it a game? "You surprised me, that's all."

She laughed. "T'at must be some achievement, to surprise super-trooper Major Alan." Then she added provokingly: "Besides what does you wife t'ink? . . . You iss married?" it was more a statement.

Thoughtfully he withdrew his feet from the water, and allowed eddies of wind to dry them off. "Yes, I am married."

"She do not mind t'at you iss always away. On dangerous secret missions?"

"She doesn't have to. She knew I'd be away a lot before she married me."

"Iss she pretty?"

Again Hawksby felt unaccountably embarrassed. Perhaps it was more resentment. He still wasn't sure if he was being deliberately chatted up. McDermid's warning was ringing loud and clear in his mind.

He said: "*I* think so."

Eva raised an eyebrow. There was something about the tone of his reply. "What iss t'e matter, Alan? You iss torn between two women."

"No," he said quickly, astonished at her suggestion, but not realising what she meant. "There're no other women in my life."

Eva smiled patiently. "I meant me," she said softly. He felt her hand on his forearm and before he could reply, she added: "I t'ink per'aps you iss not so 'appy wit' your wife as you would like. No, don't answer me. It iss not necessary. I 'af known many men and, well, I t'ink I understand t'em more t'an many women. Even mysterious Major Alan. Per'aps I am understanding a little about you. Your eyes gives away a lot . . ."

He scarcely heard a word she said. He was intrigued by the closeness of her mouth and the even white teeth. They seemed to be drawing him inexorably towards her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

KERMAN – BANDAR ABBAS ROAD: 0900 hrs, Sunday 21st September

The troops at the roadblock were very thorough.

Dave Forbes and Hameda Gulistani were the last ones off the bus. As they stepped down, grim-faced soldiers barged their way past to begin an intensive search of the vehicle. Seats were overturned and the pathetic bundles of market wares were opened, along with the tattered ranks of luggage fastened to the roof-rack.

A long line of passengers still led to the improvised check-point. In common with peasants the world over they accepted the interminable delay with resignation. The talk was of war and of Iraqi infiltrators. Some suggested it was part of a dragnet for Americans using the invasion as an opportunity to try again to rescue their hostages.

A toothy youth turned to Forbes, his eyes ablaze. "I go. I fight! I kill many Iraqi dogs! I die for my country and the Revolution!"

The sergeant smiled politely. Silly sod – hadn't he ever heard General Patton's famous, if less glamorous warcry? "Don't die for your country; make the other dumb bastard die for his." Something like that, anyway. It saddened him that the world was still full of political tyrants who could stir up enough hysteria to send off a nation of gullible youngsters to fight their wars, armed with no proper training and a belief in their own invincibility. He'd even heard someone on the bus say there were tablets that could make Iranian soldiers invisible.

"I do not like the look of this, Mr. Dave."

Forbes glanced at Hameda. "No. They seem to be very

thorough. I don't know if they're looking for us or Iraqis. Immaterial really."

Forbes gestured to Hameda to follow him into the shade of a large bush which shielded them from a direct view of the roadblock. On the other side of the bush a dusty track led away to a small village on the lower slope.

A sudden cry went up from the crowd. Fingers pointed. Forbes and Hameda looked up. High in the western sky the sun glinted on a fast-moving shape. From the distance it was impossible to identify it. If it was Iraqi, it was a long way from home. Probably at the limit of its combat range.

"Kill the aggressor!" someone yelled and everyone took up the chant.

As though in answer to their demand another aircraft, much higher, came from out of the sun, swooping in a power dive. One of them was probably a Phantom from Shiraz. There was a sudden puff of smoke. It looked like cotton wool from that distance, but no noise could be heard by the appreciative audience twenty thousand feet below.

"Kill the aggressor!" "Kill the aggressor!"

The tiny missile spiralled downward towards the unsuspecting jet. The noise was scarcely audible but it struck with a violence that could be felt even at that range. Trailing a greasy coil of smoke, the wreckage plummeted towards the dun-coloured hills in the distance, and a cheer went up from the crowd.

Forbes nudged Hameda. "These sods don't even know whose plane's been downed." He shook his head sadly. "C'mon, let's slip away while they're all celebrating."

As he led her down the rough stone embankment to the track, he could feel the strain of being so close to foreigners for a prolonged period begin to lift. For a few precious moments there was no fear of being discovered. No dread of breaking an unknown custom, or inadvertently saying the wrong thing. Such small mistakes, but such a big price to pay.

The noise of the crowd drifted away until all they could hear was the sound of their own feet on the dusty track. The peace and tranquillity affected Hameda too. She unhooked the facemask of her *chador*.

"One day," she said, "when all this is over, I think I will want to return."

Forbes lit a cigarette. It was locally-made and very strong, but he wasn't complaining; it helped to heighten the welcome sense of freedom. "I can understand that. I've been to many countries, Hameda, but this one's special." He blew a stream of smoke. "Mind you, this isn't exactly the best way to see it. In by parachute at the dead of night, hounded around by the local law and the army . . ."

She smiled, and he wondered if she was still thinking about the American. As if sensing his thoughts she said: "You know, Mr. Dave, I do not really think I have a future with Curt."

"No?" He tried to sound surprised.

Hameda looked straight ahead at some point in the distant heat-haze, beyond the village that they were approaching. "Since we parted, I realise that I have been used. Oh, I am willing, but I have been used. By America. By Curt. Even by you and your friends. I look at the world with the innocence of an adolescent.

"Curt never made promises, but I assume many. He was too kind to hurt my feelings. Too thoughtful to tell me the truth. He never really encouraged me to leave."

And you're still thinking like an innocent, Forbes thought grimly. But he said: "It's a tough old game that Curt's mixed up in. You have to make unpopular decisions. You know, you always hurt the ones you love. Like the song goes."

"Pardon?" Her eyes were big and dark.

He smiled. "Just a saying. It's easy to hurt those you're fond of."

"You think that Curt really was – how d'you say – fond of me?"

"He'd be a fool not to be. I'm sure he was," he said truthfully.

She laughed lightly, a pleasantly musical sound. "Always you say things to cheer me. You are a nice man."

Can't disagree there, thought Forbes, drawing himself up to his full height.

"Are you married, Mr. Dave?" He sensed it was a loaded question.

"No, not any more." The smile seemed to freeze on his face. "I'm divorced now. You know, separated."

"In Persia you can have several wives."

"One was enough."

"You did not like it?"

"It didn't work out," he replied stiffly.

He wanted to change the subject, but Hameda was intrigued. "And you have not been in love with another woman since?"

"In love?" he seemed surprised by her question. "Sort of. From afar. Although I don't think I realised at the time. The wife of another officer in my regiment." He paused. He hadn't meant it to sound dramatic. But it did. And, at the time, it had been. "She died."

"And her husband?"

Strange, thought Forbes, that the memory, even after all these years – how many, three, four? – could still hurt. Touch a raw spot. "He was my mate. My best friend."

"Not any more?" She seemed genuinely concerned.

"We're still mates," he said. "But we don't see much of each other now. Not since Trish died."

That was true. Since Trish died. Since then some secret bond between the two men had snapped. Captain Jack Ducane hadn't so much left the regiment as been kicked out. Security risk. That was a laugh. Jacko was the most dedicated pilgrim he'd ever come across: his only mistake was that his wife had been blackmailed into giving information to the IRA. Information she should never have known in the first place. Information that could only have come from her husband.

Really it was just a cruel twist of fate. It should never have happened, but it did. And she had paid the price with her life. Jacko had paid for it with his career.

Oh, they'd been nice about it at Hereford. Jacko and he had fought well, but still the price had to be paid. RTU'd. The dreaded punishment for any SAS man – to be returned to his original unit. It had been suggested to Jacko that he did

it voluntarily and he did. But it broke his heart.

Even returning to the Parachute Regiment with his majority had a bitter irony. After a year of no action and missing his past friends, Major Jack Ducane had left the Army altogether. And everything else. He'd sold up his home in Fulham and moved to an idyllic cottage in Devon, taking his daughter, Sarah, with him. Forbes had visited them once. A couple of years ago. Jacko had got a job as a security adviser with one of the several firms set up by past members of the regiment. He was amongst old comrades, but it wasn't the same.

They'd been having tea on the lawn. On a hot summer's day. Then young Sarah had walked in from playing with friends. In through the rose-arch.

Seven years old, and the living image of her mother.

Forbes hadn't been back since.

Hameda stopped walking. She turned and looked up to him. "I'm sorry to learn of your sorrow, Mr. Dave. You deserve more from God than that. I am sure He will give it to you."

Forbes felt his cheeks pink.

"I want you to know," she continued, "that if I do return here in the future, I'd be happy if you were by my side. No man should be without love for so long. I understand a man's needs. And I want you to know that if you want to make love with me . . ." She averted her eyes ". . . then I would be very happy for you." Again she looked back up into his eyes. "And me."

Forbes was stunned. It took a moment to overcome his paralysis and start walking again. He fixed his gaze dead ahead.

This was too much. How in the hell was he supposed to cope with this? As if they didn't have enough problems.

But, gradually, as they neared the village, his walk became a little more jaunty.

The wireless loudspeaker in the tea-house blared into the village square: "*People of Islam arise! Arise! Arise against the vampire Saddam Hussein! He collaborates with those twin Satans – the*

enemies of the Islamic Revolution – America and the Soviet Union. All three are each worse than the other!"

Forbes smiled at the illogical and ungrammatical curse as he drank tea with Hameda on a patch of grass outside the village hostelry. The place was packed out to hear the latest broadcast and call to arms.

"Now the devil is rattling at our gates! Arise, Islam! All able-bodied men! Gather yourselves together. Gather your lorries and your buses. Gather your courage! Gather God's spirit like armour! Come to the front . . .!"

The words were drowned in cheers.

Hameda said, "It looks worrying. I am afraid. It was bad for us before, but they say there are now roadblocks everywhere. Everyone is volunteering for the front and they tell them all to be aware of Iraqi infiltrators and sixth columnists."

"Fifth," Forbes corrected absently.

"I am sorry." She looked at him intently. "I am disturbing your thoughts, Mr. Dave."

God woman, you've disturbed them more than you think. "Drop the Mister, eh? Just Dave."

"Yes, Dave."

"Tell me, what's the going rate for one of these bashed-up old trucks we see all over the place?"

"I am sorry. Old trucks? What is 'rate'?"

"Price. How many toman for an old lorry?"

She shrugged. "Last year my cousin bought one for twenty-five thousand toman. But now petrol is difficult. Maybe prices are lower."

Forbes grinned. "Then let's lead a battle party to the front. I've ample cash to buy a jalopy. We can take some of these eager old men with us."

Her forehead creased in a frown. "You joke! Volunteer to fight Iraqis? You are crazy!"

Forbes said thoughtfully: "Not exactly what I had in mind. But at least it's in the right direction."

"You *are* crazy!"

He ignored her outburst. He'd overlook anything said by a woman who had just pledged her body to him. "I've got

green battledress in this bag, and two Ingrams. This lot'll be unarmed. Well, unless they bring their pitchforks with them."

"You cannot lead them!" she protested.

"You forget I'm a sergeant in the British Army."

Still she looked horrified. "They will question. They will find us out."

Forbes laughed. "You don't question *this* sergeant, luv. You don't argue. You just do what you're TOLD!" He raised his voice to illustrate the point.

Hameda shook her head in disbelief, but at least she smiled. He knew then it could work.

ZAGROS: 1100 hrs, Sunday 21st September

Afterwards Hawksby was angry. With himself.

Through the rest of the day he had recurring visions of their brief and violent lovemaking in the cool shade beneath the bridge.

A collage of images flashed across his mind. The paleness of her skin, damp and cold with streamwater. He recalled the rampant eagerness with which he had taken her, her back jammed hard against the wet stones. And her delirious response, thrusting vulgarly against him, seemingly milking the passion from him. It had been over in minutes. Too soon.

Perhaps she had been putting on an act. But something about her tenderness afterwards suggested otherwise.

As if to reassure him she had said: "Don't worry, Alan, I do not make trouble. You 'af enough worries. No one will efer know about us." She was too confident. Kangers Webster and Pogo Penaia had come down to the stream to shave. They too had sought the obvious shelter of the bridge. Luckily Eva had brought down two black plastic jerry cans for water, so they looked as though they had been working.

The Australian noticed the smudges of sand that clung to damp patches on Hawksby's top. "What's up, boss? You fall in?"

Pogo gave an inscrutable Fijian smile. While Hawksby

helped Eva carry the cans back up the slope, she had asked suddenly: "You do not 'af a liking for Jon'i, do you?"

He squinted at the bright reflection of sunlight on the white scree. "He doesn't worry me."

"No, but you do not like 'im?"

"As a person, well, not much. But it's immaterial. It's just a job. To get him – well, both of you – out of here."

Eva stopped to rest and put down the jerry can. She looked down towards the valley stream, the gusting wind tugging at her fatigues. Below they could see the dust dancing. "And iss it just a job if you 'ad to kill us both?"

Hawksby looked at her darkly. "I don't make a habit of killing women I've just made love to. Besides, what have you two been up to that should make you think we'd be given orders to get rid of you?"

He had meant it as a rhetorical question. Although he still had a natural curiosity, he had no desire to get possession of information that Whitehall obviously considered he should not have.

She held his gaze. "Did you know t'at t'e British Government iss largely responsible for getting Khomeini into power in Iran?"

He raised his hand to stop her, but she was insistent. "It wass a scheme by your Foreign Office to – what d' you say? – fire t'e warning shot across t'e bows of t'e Shah . . ."

"Look, Eva, I really don't want to know all this."

"Per'aps you should, Alan. Understand why Jon'i and I iss so worried t'at you may 'af been ordered to . . . to . . . dispense wit' us. Yes? And if you do, you will be 'elping to cover-up an international diplomatic bungle of t'e 'ighest order."

"That would be nothing new."

She picked up the jerry can and started up the slope again. "Britain wanted to keep t'e Shah in power. But t'ey t'ought with 'is repressive measures t'at eventually a coup would come. Or a revolution will topple 'im. Also t'ey iss worried of t'e links t'e Shah 'af with Egypt. Imagine it. T'e two most powerful military nations in t'e Middle East? Forming an axis alliance? Your Arab friends in t'e Gulf iss very con-

cerned. T'ey lead t'e area by economic might. Yes? Not military."

Hawksby crunched steadily up the slope. He didn't like what he was hearing; he got the distinct feeling he was getting the text of some top-secret Cabinet papers at Number 10.

"So your government decide to give t'e exiled Ayatollah some . . . what? . . . moral support," she continued. "And some finance. It iss t'ey who manages to put pressure on Iraqi Government to 'af 'im expelled. To somewhere t'ey will 'af more influence. So Khomeini go to Paris. And 'is organisation iss funded by your British Secret Service under t'e code-name of Fulcrum. I imagine t'at iss somet'ing to do wit' preserving t'e balance of power. It wass meant to get t'e Shah worried about a revolution to come. And t'en 'e become less oppressive."

"You're not suggesting Britain wanted to get rid of the Shah?"

She laughed bitterly. "You iss joking! Certainly not. T'ey just want to control Khomeini and turn t'e 'eat on t'e Shah when it suited. Make 'im, you say, toe t'e line. 'E wass an arrogant bastard, you know."

Hawksby reflected for a moment. "But it went wrong. Obviously?"

Indecision flashed across Eva's face, as she hesitated. "Yes. Khomeini iss given just enough money to keep 'im sweet. Enough to make loud bark, but no bite. But some'ow it got out of 'and. Too much money iss fed into t'e system, yes? Too many useful contacts go 'is way." They were now nearing the hide and she stopped, wanting to keep out of earshot. "T'e balance wass tilted. You know the rest. Khomeini stormed 'ome to Teheran in triumph. And t'e Shah . . . well, you see it iss not t'e sort of story t'at Britain iss wanting to get out. For a start t'e Americans would not be very 'appy . . ."

Hawksby had already examined the obvious aspects. Mentally he shifted the problems around, but something concerned him. Something didn't tie-up. He didn't mention it to Eva. Instead he said, "At a guess, you have some sort of evidence of this on that film?"

She nodded. "We 'af photographs of documents about t'is Fulcrum business. It iss not my imagination, yes? We 'af proof. Confirmation."

"And you think that, by me knowing this, it will prevent me from executing you and Jonathan?"

"I t'ink you iss an honest man, Alan," she said seriously. "And I 'af no doubt you would eliminate anyone if you wass told to. But you might 'esitate if you knew t'e reason why t'at order iss given."

"Look, I can now understand your reason for worry. But nothing's changed. We have *no* such orders. And if we did, they would be questioned, I promise you. We're not a Gestapo outfit." He looked into her eyes. "But there was no need to – to have it off with me just as some sort of insurance policy."

She looked hurt. "I make love wit' you because I wanted to, Alan." Then she pouted. "But per'aps it iss a little insurance. I 'af a natural instinct for self-preservation." She smiled.

"I'd noticed."

As the day progressed Hawksby's recollection of the conversation added to his increasing irritability. He was furious with himself for having succumbed to the Norwegian. Whether she was genuine in her affections or not was immaterial. He had compromised himself and given her a lever to use against him that could put the mission in jeopardy. Even to the extent of being almost caught in the act by Kangers Webster and Pogo. What would have happened, he asked himself, if they had been patrolling Iranian soldiers? Also he had added to his own vulnerability by listening to her account of their claimed discovery about British activities. Previously he would have carried out any orders; now he found himself questioning the whole reason for the mission itself.

He could understand how a well-intentioned secret service plan could back-fire. And why, as a result, Britain would want to prevent Blake's discovery from being made public. But what about Khomeini? He was hardly likely to broadcast the story. If it became known that Britain had helped get him

to power, he and his precious Revolution would be finished.

So why risk a sensitive and highly dangerous operation like Snapdragon to rescue Blake? If Crazy K had found out about the journalist's discovery, then he and his girlfriend would have undoubtedly joined the hundreds being executed weekly in Iran's prisons. Why not let your enemy do your dirty work for you?

No, Hawksby decided, there was a missing element to the whole business. Someone, somewhere had another reason for wanting Blake out. But who? And why?

"Boss?" It was Perkis.

"What is it?"

Taken aback by the major's tone, the driver hesitated. "Er, it was about the transmission tonight."

"Well?"

Perkis flushed. He'd meant to stick to his earlier decision, but thoughts of his wife were starting to play on his mind. "Well, boss, I was wondering if you could slip in an enquiry about me missus? You know, she's expecting our first sprog. And, well, there was complications . . ."

Hawksby exploded. "Good grief, man! What in damnation do you think we're on, a bloody Sunday school outing? Our transmissions aren't Two Way Family Favourites, Perkis. Are you trying to have us located by Iranian listening stations? Act your age." His jaw set in a firm line. "Go on, get out of my sight. And just remember you're in the bloody Army. If you don't like it, get out!"

Perkis smarted. He'd never received such a dressing down since he'd been in 22 SAS. He could scarcely believe his ears. Suppressing his anger, he turned and walked away. His clenched knuckles showed white.

"Wee bit hard on the lad, boss."

Hawksby had been unaware of McDermid standing behind him. "Don't you start, Scottie. Mind your own business."

The Scotsman stood his ground. Everyone knew that with the 'squeeze-box' they could transmit the text of the entire Bible in a few minutes. A one line personal query would make no difference. "Look, boss, I dunna give a monkey's where ye

dip y' wick, but dunna take et oot on us if she wasna up te much . . ."

Christ, thought Hawksby, Kangers has been blabbing. "Corporal, you are OUT OF ORDER! Now shut your mouth and keep it that way! That comment was untrue, unnecessary and, I repeat, *definitely* out of order! Got it?"

"Sah!" McDermid grated at the major's back as Hawksby turned and strode away.

He shook his head. "I've noo seen him like this afore."

KERMAN – BANDAR ABBAS ROAD: 1130 hrs, Sunday 21st September

"GET ABOARD! COME ALONG! YOU'RE IN THE ARMY NOW!" bawled the burly Iranian Army sergeant as he strutted alongside the neglected old lorry which still stank of its last consignment of citrus fruit. "I WANT DISCIPLINE NOW WE'RE OFF TO FIGHT THE INFIDELS!"

No one in the remote village had seen where he'd come from. He just emerged at the tea-house as if from nowhere, along with a female revolutionary guard. Yet he certainly seemed to know what he was doing as he lined up the untidy rows of village volunteers to make his selection. To the surprise of many he asked each man in turn whether he had any military experience and told them to stand to one side – and promptly left them out of his force. He explained curtly that an Iranian Army officer would be along shortly to re-enlist them. He didn't seem the sort of man to argue with.

Women of the chosen ones began to weep. The village elders looked on, impressed. No one had dreamed that the Islamic war machine could be mobilised so fast. Before the wireless broadcast an hour earlier, no one had even known they were at war.

The thirty volunteers scrambled aboard with their hastily-grabbed bundles of possessions, the tailboard was bolted up, and the Iranian Army sergeant clambered into the cab alongside the woman.

There were cheers and waves and tears as he gunned the old vehicle out of the square. Even its irregular backfiring seemed symbolic of the war that lay ahead.

At the edge of the village, the sergeant pulled the lorry to a halt outside a shop where a carpet weaver was at work. He handed the woman a wad of notes. "Be an angel and buy me the best carpet you can get. Nothing too big, mind."

She looked astonished. "What?"

"When we get back I want proof that I got here." He winked at her. "It'll look good in the NCO's Mess."

ZAGROS: 2200 hrs, Sunday 21st September

The brooding atmosphere lasted until transmission time. Reception was poor but Tiger managed to pick up the confirmation signal for a rendezvous at last light the next day. Two Rigid Raiders, manned by Captain Johnny Fraser's Sabre Team, would come in through the treacherous coastal waters to the agreed RV. It all seemed so near, yet so far.

They were also given news of the Iraqi invasion. Everyone had plenty to think about.

At 2300 hours the two Land Rovers worked their way down the slope to the winding mountain road. Tonight was to be a fast dash with the idea of getting well clear of the previous night's pursuers if they were still in the area. The journey was uneventful, which only served to increase the tension. It was only relieved when they passed a small convoy of Iranian Army trucks travelling the other way. Hawksby decided to bluff it out and they honked their horns and waved as they passed. A cheer went up from the troops in the convoy and they brandished their weapons in the air. They were on their way to the front.

Twice the Panthers stopped at deserted petrol stations to see if fuel could be syphoned off, but on both occasions signs had been posted by the Gendarmerie. All fuel had been requisitioned for the war effort.

Not wishing to chance their luck further, they turned off

the road again. Finally they came to rest in the barren high ground north-west of Kazerun. By now their fuel had become critically low. With the aid of binoculars it was possible to distinguish some of the main features of the major town as the dark shapes of its skyline loomed out of the early morning mist some ten miles distant. It was on the national grid and had its own airfield. On the other side of the valley, beyond the maze of streets, there were water-pumping stations on the slopes of the towering Dovan mountain range.

Hawksby lowered the glasses. "If there's a chance of getting fuel, Scottie, it'll be there. I want a continual watch on activity in the town all day. Move a couple of chaps in for a closer look-see. Log all transport movement and note where all likely sources of fuel might be. There are also some decent JARIC photos of the place that might help. Tonight we'll see if we can't help ourselves to a gallon or two."

McDermid nodded in agreement. "Only thing tha' concerns me, boss, is tha' we've managed te throw 'em off our trail. If we go into Kazerun, we could stir up the hornets' nest again."

"That's a danger wherever and whenever we strike. And I don't see an alternative, d'you?"

McDermid shrugged. "Na doot ye're right. Aye."

"Look, boss," Kangers Webster said, prodding a finger at his notebook. "Five convoys of fuel moving through at a rate of one an hour. Most of the stuff is on the main road on the other side of Kazerun. Troops, ammunition trucks. Seem to be reinforcements from the Third Army Corps at Shiraz on their way to the front. It's all pretty damn congested. But some, mostly fuel, is coming this way. I reckon it's destined for the Navy base at Bushehr. If fightin's goin' on round the refineries at Abadan their usual fuel reserves could be cut off."

Hawksby studied the map. "Convenient," he muttered. It would make sense for the Iranians to grab any emergency reserves of fuel from inland if their main fuel source on the border with Iraq was threatened. Anyway, the reason was immaterial. A convoy on the open road was a more tempting proposition than crawling around Kazerun on their hands

and knees all night, trying to find a fuel dump that hadn't been requisitioned.

"It wouldna be a clever idea te take on an entire convoy." McDermid was thinking aloud. "We need a way of getting t' fuel tankers away from the escorts."

Perkis said suddenly: "I've an idea what might work . . ." Almost immediately he shut up again. He didn't feel inclined to get another dressing-down from Hawksby who, unlike other SAS commanders, didn't take kindly to ill-conceived suggestions, however well-intentioned. Apart from that he didn't feel like suggesting anything to the major, except where to stick his arrogance.

Sensing his hesitation, McDermid said: "Spit it out, lad. Let's see what them CSEs did fer y' education."

"Well, it ain't nothin' that wonderful. I just thought we could take a coupla 'eadlights out of one of the Panthers. As we're runnin' on IR, it don't matter. An' then set 'em up on a battery. Just round a bend."

"How'd y'reckon that'd work?" Kangers asked, intrigued.

Perkis told them. Everyone seemed impressed. All attention turned to Hawksby for judgment, watching the hooded eyes as they peered over the thin hooked nose at the demonstration diagram scrawled in the sand.

After a moment, he said slowly: "Okay, chaps, we'll give it a whirl."

From the other side of the mountain hide, Eva Olsen watched the discussion group with interest. But her main attention was fixed on Hawksby. During the day he'd changed into baggy khaki shorts for comfort. The combined effect of the large Para boots emphasised his height and lean build. She noted there was not a spare ounce of fat on his body which glistened with perspiration. His stomach was flat and hard, the wiry muscle patterns knotted around his shoulders as he sat in his familiar hunched position. She could see now why the men called him the Hawk. It wasn't just a play on the name.

The jutting beard and the brown cloth sweatband around the wild black hair gave him a distinctly piratical look.

Physical desire for him suddenly throbbed in her, as she remembered the way he had taken her the day before. Ruthless. Animal.

"Can't you take your bloody eyes off him?"

Blake's harsh words made her jump.

"Jon'i! You surprise me. And do not be silly. Where am I supposed to look? Stare at t'is bloody desert all day. Or t'e sky. Do I 'af to watch you all t'e time?"

Blake sat beside her on the Land Rover's bonnet. "Don't kid me, Eva. I know you too well. Remember? You've only had eyes for your soldier boyfriend lately. Never give me a second glance. It gets noticed, y'know. I heard a couple of the others joking about it yesterday."

"Yes?"

"You can look like that if you like, but it's true."

"T'ey just 'af soldiers' fun. T'ey iss just jealous, I expect. I 'af been known to interest men before, you know."

Blake sneered. "Don't I just."

"Alan iss all right. Maybe very British officer type, but 'e iss okay."

"Just because he's promised not to bump you off."

Eva was exasperated. "*Veither* of us, Jon'i. I told you 'e said 'e 'ad no such orders. 'E says they iss not Nazis. 'E did not even know why we are being rescued."

"Balls!"

"I believe 'im, Jon'i."

"You'd believe anyone who gave you one."

She stepped away. "You make me sick sometimes. I 'af not been near 'im."

"What about the comments by that bloody uncouth Aussie and the others?"

Her eyes glared like an angry cat's. "I tell you. Soldiers' rumours. Armies are running on rumours, or 'adn't you 'eard? God, it wass *you* who wanted me to find out what 'e know about us."

"And what about your film?" he demanded.

"What about it? 'E told you 'e iss keeping it."

"Don't you realise? If we don't get it back, we'll never see it again."

"*You* know what t'e documents said, Jon'i," she challenged.

"Yes, but that's *not* evidence!"

Eva curled her lips in a snarl. "Jon'i, you iss getting to be a real pain in t'e arse. I am beginning to wonder what it was I efer saw in you."

Blake scowled after her as she turned away. Bloody randy cow. he thought savagely. I know what you saw in me all right. The only bloody Englishmen in Teheran with prick enough to satisfy you! He kicked at the wheel of Panther One. From the other side of the hide Perkis glowered at him.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

KAZERUN – BUSHEHR ROAD: 2230 hrs, Monday 22nd September

The driver of tanker No. 396 hadn't heard the two low-velocity shots fired from a silenced muzzle at the roadside. So he couldn't understand why the tanker was slowing down. He couldn't see that two of the four heavy-duty tyres on the rear-axle were spinning uselessly, their traction gone.

"We're falling behind the others," his companion observed lethargically. "Step on it, can't you?"

The driver frowned. It must be these unmade mountain roads. They were hopeless with a heavy load like this in a truck meant for metalled surfaces. His was the last tanker in the convoy and, behind him, the driver of the escorting armoured personnel carrier hooted angrily. In front, the tail end of the tanker column had disappeared around a tight left-hand bend. The road began to run downhill, flanked by a steep embankment on the left.

That's better. Good gradient. They were speeding up now.

Lazily the driver manhandled the big wheel, nosing the huge tanker around the bend. He was expecting to see the red trailer lights of the next vehicle some way ahead. He didn't. He was just suddenly aware of the blazing headlights of the oncoming vehicle right in front of him!

He hit the brakes. He spun the wheel. He cried out. There was no way he could miss it! He shut his eyes.

He heard the crack of the impact and the tinkling of glass and saw the dazzling headlights go out as he hurtled off the road. The forward momentum of the tanker came to a juddering halt as it ploughed axle-deep into soft sand. The

driver braced himself against the wheel. But his companion wasn't so lucky. The man's head smashed against the windscreen.

Dazed, the driver saw soldiers running towards him in the glare of his own lights. The cab door was yanked open and he found himself looking down the ugly snout of a sub-machine gun. His mouth dropped open in surprise, and stayed open as the SAS man's gun spat twice.

Meanwhile the slab-sided M113 personnel carrier had ground to a halt on the road. The commander, amazed at the sudden disappearance of the tanker in front of him, opened his hatch and peered out.

Obviously there had been some sort of accident. He could distinguish the oval shape of the tanker's rear end jutting from the verge on his right. But the wreckage on the road puzzled him. A roadblock?

He was not expecting the thump immediately behind him as Tiger dropped down the embankment to land on the flat top of the carrier. The commander tried to twist round in his turret. His eyes caught the glint of razor steel as the Gurkha's long, curved *kukri* knife scythed through the air.

There was no cry as it hooked into the Iranian's wind-pipe, almost severing his head, until it met the resistance offered by the neck bone. Withdrawing the blade, Tiger stamped hard on the man's head, stuffing the limp body inside the vehicle. Withdrawing an L2 fragmentation grenade from his belt pouch, the little SAS corporal extracted the pin and let it topple in after the hapless commander.

Grabbing the bloodied *kukri* he'd let fall, the soldier just had time to drop to the road before the grenade ignited.

The contained explosion shook the carrier like a living thing. The blast spat off the unbolted hatch cover with contempt. By the time Tiger had doubled back to the tanker the carrier's fuel tanks had ignited, adding to the raging pyre.

"That your idea of a quiet disposal job?" Kangers asked sarcastically. He was helping the rest of the team fill the jerry cans from the tanker.

Tiger's white teeth grinned beneath the ever-cheerful eyes. "I get carried away."

"Right, that's it," Hawksby said and spun the tanker tap to the 'Off' position.

"Want me to charge it?" Kangers offered. "Make a lovely blaze, it would."

The major started back to Panther One. "No point in being unsporting. I reckon the poor buggers have got enough on their plate with the Iraqis. Besides, Tiger's beacon is quite enough."

Shaking his head sadly, Kangers said, "Boss, you're goin' soft in yer old age."

ISFAHAN: 2300 hrs, Monday 22nd September

He wasn't going to die.

Curt Swartz Jnr. was determined of that. But he knew if he remained captive at the Isfahan villa, it was a foregone conclusion.

He didn't pretend to understand his tormentors' ploy, but he knew they were up to something. The sudden friendly approach, food, drink and sleep . . . it was all an elaborate trick to get him off guard, and make him feel grateful to the nice guy. The old hard man, soft man technique that worked so well.

Yet it was all so stupid. If *he* knew he was lying, so must they by now. So, coolly and calmly, Curt had decided that he wasn't going to wait. Now that his tortured body was starting to heal, he could concentrate his mind above the lingering pain. He could recall his exhaustive training and summon the determination and incentive to live.

That was the easiest part. He had an intense yearning to make love to Alison again, even if it was for just one more time. And to hold the kids. The thoughts of putting them through the emotional mangle endured by the relatives of the embassy hostages was just too much.

And there was Hameda. Sweet innocent Hameda. He would dearly like to square things with her.

He had more incentive to survive now than he'd ever had in his life before.

His initial plan to mix kerosene and detergent to form a crude explosive mixture had been thwarted for the simplest of reasons. Iran's economy was in such dire straits that the guard was unable to buy any. Or so he said. Curt would just have to put up with the regular power cuts and do without a lamp. And he'd have to put up with dirty clothes for a few more days.

It was the electricity problem that gave Curt his second idea. He shouted to the guard, "Hey! My light's gone out! Is that another damn power failure? Hey, guard!" Outside there was the reluctant shuffle of feet. "Hey, guard!"

"What you want?" Followed by a yawn.

"Is there a power cut?"

"No. Go to sleep."

"My light's gone out. I'm trying to read."

Impatient. "Night is for sleep. You sleep."

"Be fair, I'm in too much pain to sleep. Please."

The small grille in the door slid back. A torch beam cut into the blackened room. "American, you stand back. No funny business."

Curt sat on the bed. A face appeared at the aperture. The nose wrinkled in disdain. "You piss? I can smell." The acrid stench of urine was strong.

"An accident. I kicked the can in the dark."

Come on, you bastard.

There was a faint clank of metal as the lock turned. A sliver of light played along the coiled length of bedspring that ran from the door handle to the empty light socket.

The second coil came down from the socket to the floor where the pool of urine lay just behind the door.

As the guard turned the handle and stepped in, the suddenness of the arcing blue light was as stark and brilliant as forked lightning, illuminating the look of frozen horror on his face. He pitched forward onto the floor. The wire swung back and forth across the urine puddle, fizzing and spitting a shower of sparks.

The 110 volts had only stunned him and Curt had to move fast to break the man's neck by stamping hard.

Quietly Curt picked up the dropped carbine, checked it

over, and slipped out onto the landing. It was deserted. He limped across to the head of the stairs and peered down. The entrance lobby, too, was empty. He breathed a sight of relief.

So far so good.

It took a long time to descend to the ground floor. Each footstep was agony, reviving the livid bruises that had swollen the soles of his feet after the thrashing with rubber hoses. He pushed the thought from his mind. That was all over now. A few more minutes and he would be a free man, able to start the long-planned escape route to Turkey.

"Hussein?" It was the dead guard's name. The inquiring voice came from somewhere below. Silently Curt backed into an alcove on the turn of the stairs. A portrait of Ayatollah Khomeini frowned down from its pride of place above his head. "HUSSEIN!" Below, the guard wandered into view and peered up the stairs. "Are you up there?"

The man shrugged and lit a cigarette. He went to walk away, then hesitated. He moved to the bottom of the stairs, leaning on the banister. "If you're asleep, Hussein, then Murad will pull your ears off with pliers. Don't let him catch you!" He chuckled.

Then the mirth died on his lips. He saw a slight movement in the alcove. A nervous smile. "Hussein? You playing stupid games? I can see you." The incident with the kitchen fire and the strange mullah a few days earlier had played on his nerves. Cautiously he unshouldered his carbine.

The Heckler & Koch G3 came alive in Curt's hands, trembling violently as it spat out its contents. Dying echoes reverberated around the hallway as the American stumbled down the stairs to the main door. He tried it – it was locked and bolted. Shit! A step back. The muzzle of the G3 drew level to the lock casing. Curt's fear and anger poured out through the weapon as he squeezed the trigger and blew the doors open. Cool, sweet night air rushed in.

"Hey, you!"

Curt spun round. Half-a-dozen guards were emerging from doors around the hall. He fired a long raking burst that sent them scurrying back under cover. Plaster fell in lumps to the floor. Shells richocheted haphazardly from wall to wall.

His heart pounding in his chest, the American launched himself into the garden, ignoring the agony of his feet. Grimacing, he pounded down the path to the gate but one look at the mass of bolts, chains and padlocks told him he couldn't shoot his way through. He would have to scale it.

Suddenly he was aware of the pain. Deep in his chest. A pain that felt like a knife being twisted. Something seemed to explode. He felt the stabbing sensation radiate to his left shoulder. His arm felt numb. His G3 clattered onto the stone slabs.

Then he heard it. The voice. Not here! Impossible. Alison couldn't be here.

He realised he was on his knees. The pain was consuming him. His whole body was just one throbbing, excruciating pain.

He opened his eyes. He had not been mistaken. Through the red mist he saw her come.

As she reached him, she leaned forward, concerned. He saw the worry in her eyes. But then he saw that her eyes were not blue but brown. And her skin was swarthy. She had bad teeth. She was a man.

Curt Swartz Jnr. was dead.

ZAGROS: 0045 hrs, Tuesday 23rd September

Jim Perkis drove like a man possessed.

As Panther One had led the way south yet again, McDermid had casually mentioned that during the earlier transmission from their hide overlooking Kazerun, Tiger had picked up a special message from London.

Apparently, after the blazing row the day before, the Hawk had thought better of his decision, because the message was a personal one for Trooper James Perkis: *Wife Janet says your son Jeremy, weight 7lb 6ozs, wants you home soonest. Please ask colleagues for advice on intensive nappy training before return. Baptism due on 27 Sept.*

"Jesus," McDermid had said. "Y'canna call the wee laddie Jeremy. Tha's a bleddy officer's name!"

Perkis looked immensely serious. "I know! I told 'er that

was no good. I wanted Bill. William, you know. And *she* knows that! That's why she's 'aving 'im baptized early. When? Gawd! That's in only four days' time! What gratitude after me worryin' over 'er."

"Perkis, laddie."

"Yes, Scottie?"

"I reckon tha' wife'n yours is pullin' y'pisser."

But Perkis didn't care. It was fantastic news, and with their coastal rendezvous only hours away, and no sign of the enemy, he'd have cheerfully pushed Panther One all the way. As it was he hummed an infuriatingly tuneless version of 'Where Will The Baby's Dimple Be' during the entire fifty mile cross-country dash.

The high folds of rock had flattened out completely now to become a vast undulating mountain basin. It was good going for the Land Rovers, only the occasional shallow wadi causing them to slow. The sky, too, added to the sense of exhilaration. Dark clouds scudded over angrily, threatening rain to break the heavy humidty of the past few days. On the distant mountains fork lightning stabbed viciously at the peaks. After fifty hectic miles on a southern trajectory, the vehicles swung westwards, skirting the edge of a mountain ridge, and continued flat out across the bare dusty plain towards the coast. Another thirty miles would see them near the village of Kalameh, which guarded the winding mountain pass through the last major natural barrier thrown up by the Zagros range. Once through that, they would be in the more fertile coastal strip.

Hawksby glanced at his watch. It was nearly 0100 hours, and already they had covered almost sixty miles. They were averaging almost thirty miles an hour across country; at this rate they would hit the pass by two in the morning.

Add an hour for skirting Kalameh and the more difficult terrain, and that would allow one hour before dawn to travel the sixty miles by road through the coastal farmland. The many scattered farms and hamlets in the narrow strip meant there was no alternative cross-country route to offer better security. Bravado and speed, Hawksby decided, would be the best way.

Despite the hold-up caused by the need to acquire fuel, he reckoned they would make their RV with Johnny Fraser's four-man Sabre team from the Boat Troop by dawn. The following nightfall they would be slipping out into the Persian Gulf on the evening tide.

In fact, Hawksby reflected, at that very moment two Rigid Raider fast assault boats should be creaming into the Persian shoreline beneath the leaden night sky.

PERSIAN GULF: 0100 hrs, Tuesday 23rd September

Captain Johnny Fraser scowled out from the wheelhouse. Before him the sleek prow of the Omani fast patrol boat nudged its way through the choppy black waters of the Persian Gulf.

Beside him the British officer who commanded the vessel looked remarkably relaxed for a man approaching the hostile coast of a country at war. "Nine knots is about right," he said. "If we get picked up by a coastal radar or one of the PBs, at least they're less likely to shoot first if they think we're a fishing boat."

Fraser grinned. "That sounds like a good theory." He glanced up at the star clusters in the vast sweep of tropical sky. "But I'd be happier with more cloud cover."

The officer smiled gently. He was satisfied that the makeshift canvas awnings, which had given the vessel an ugly, stunted silhouette, would confirm to anyone on visual reconnaissance that this was, indeed, a fishing boat. Besides, if they did look too closely, he knew he could rely on its makers, Brooke Marine in England, to live up to their reputation, and deliver the necessary horse-power. And its recently refitted Exocet ship-to-ship missiles meant it could tangle with anything the Iranians cared to throw at them.

However, the SAS captain had other problems. As the officer reminded him: "I think that Met report means you'll get all the cloud cover you want, Johnny. There appear to be local atmospheric storms all down the coast. The glass is already starting to drop like a brick."

"How far now?"

"Twenty minutes," the officer replied. "That'll see us just outside coastal radar range."

Fraser nodded. Another fine theory. Like the whole of 'Operation Salvation' it hadn't taken into account the fact that Iran and Iraq would be at each other's throats in a full scale war. Heading for a stretch of deserted coast between two major naval bases left plenty to chance.

He said: "I'll get prepared."

"Call in at the galley. I ordered them to brew up to celebrate your departure. I'm sure you'll find the rest of your men there."

"Food we can do without. Sleep and ammunition . . . but tea . . .?" Still chuckling, Johnny Fraser left the wheelhouse.

In fact, having all but drained the tea-urn, the rest of his Sabre team were already assembled at the stern. The two Rigid Raider assault craft were at an advanced stage of readiness, having each been mounted with a giant 40hp Evinrude outboard.

The men had all trained with the Royal Marines Special Boat Section at Poole. Whilst the elite SBS concentrated on secret beach surveys in preparation for Royal Marine assault landings, obstacle demolition, and more lately, oil-rig protection duties, the SAS Boat Troops used the same training both as another 'means of arrival' and as a support service to the full Squadron they served. And this time, Johnny Fraser's team would be making use of the full range of their skills.

First would come the approach to within three miles of the beach in the low-profile glass fibre craft.

Once off-shore, two members of the Boat Troop would go over the side and make a 'wet' approach. After surfacing to survey the beach with image-intensifier nightsights from the sea, they would land to check for enemy positions, patrols, or the unexpected they had encountered on other missions: fishermen, smugglers and, once, a nudist colony.

After confirming that the beach was secure, the two Raider craft would drift in silently on the tide. Then it would be a race against the clock as the four men excavated the deep hole in the centre of the cove and positioned the upturned

craft to form a solid roof. Finally, dry sand would be sprinkled carefully over the dun-coloured hulls until they merged in as just two more undulations in the beach dunes.

Fraser pulled on the black rubber hood of his wet-suit and walked across the deck to where Sergeant Turner was preparing to slip the first Raider over the side.

"All set, Brummie?"

"As we'll ever be, boss." He squinted towards the horizon off the starboard beam. Dim flashes lit the distant skyline where the tropical storm raged. "It's going to be no millpond."

Fraser's teeth gleamed white against his blackened face. "If I didn't know you better, Brummie, I'd say you were a born pessimist."

ISFAHAN: 0015 hrs, Tuesday 23rd September

At the Isfahan villa where Blake and Eva Olsen had been held captive, Colonel Murad had a small office from which he and his aide had been running the dragnet that now covered a vast tract of southern Iran.

Covering most of one wall was a close-detail map of the territory on which the known route of the mysterious rescue team had been plotted. Red pins marked the course, beginning at the crash site of the stolen JetRanger. It then meandered on a southward bearing until it stopped at the wadi site of the abortive ambush attempt.

It was now just after midnight and the carefully-typed label beside the ambush pin was dated 21/9/80. The night before last.

Murad stood in front of the map, sipping slowly at a glass of tea. He had already received confirmation that one of the Navy's fast patrol boats from Bushehr had been put under his personal command, and that a replacement Chinook transport helicopter and platoon of seasoned troops from Shiraz were on immediate notice to embark.

There was no mention of the survivors of his ambush party. They were already out of contact with High Command,

who no doubt had been desperately trying to reach them to divert them to the front. Murad, of course, knew exactly where they were: out hunting, travelling south in a commandeered bus. Wherever the elusive enemy was, his men, travelling faster, could not be far behind.

The door opened, and his young aide entered. Just recently, especially since news of the Iraqi invasion, he had looked tired and unusually humourless. Now, however, he was smiling.

"I think this will cheer you, *agha*." He handed over a cipher sheet. "I have just come from the radio room."

Murad studied it, a ghost of a smile forming on his face. "Ah, a fuel convoy just outside Kazerun, eh?"

"It could be an Iraqi attack," the aide suggested.

"And what would they want with fuel in the middle of the Zagros? They'd have destroyed *all* the tankers. No, this bears all the hallmarks of our friends."

He walked across to the map and added a new red pin. Right behind it was a blue pin: his men in the bus. Just sixty miles to the left was another blue pin. His new detachment at Shiraz. Seventy miles to the south-west, just off the coast was yet another pin. His fast patrol boat.

"They could walk to the coast from Kazerun," Murad observed. "In that terrain it would take maybe three days. Hardly worth the risk of stealing petrol. So they must be going farther south. Steering clear of Bushehr."

The aide looked over his master's shoulder. "Do you think we have them?"

Murad's ghost of a smile remained. "Let us say that they are walking into an inescapable trap. All we have to do now is close it."

"And wait?"

"And wait."

Then the telephone rang. The aide snatched up the receiver. Almost immediately he handed it over to Murad. "It is your investigators on Sabs Karemi's research. They've found something." He looked hurt. "They insist on talking only to you."

RUD-E-SHUR VALLEY: 0500 hrs, Tuesday 23rd September

At last the narrow pass through the last limestone folds of the Zagros melted away into the inky blackness behind them. And with it the fear of being ambushed or trapped in the confines of the Zagros' rocky canyons. As the ground dropped steadily down towards the Gulf the increase in humidity was noticeable. The warm, moist atmosphere was oppressive and uncomfortable.

They steered south, running parallel with the coast into the wide, gently sloping valley of the Rud-e-Shur. It was formed by the last of the main inland Zagros range on their left, and a forty-mile-long scab of high and thinly-wooded coastal hills. It was almost the only area in south Iran that enjoyed any rainfall, Hawksby mused. A meagre two or three inches a year, and it looked as though they might get it all today.

"*I dunna' like this, boss.*" McDermid's voice came over the Clansman. "*This place is alive wi' bleddy people. Over.*"

It was an exaggeration, but dawn was approaching fast and local farmworkers were starting towards the mud-walled fields to begin their day's toil. No doubt the threat – or promise – of precious rain had spurred them on. Hawksby tried to sound light-hearted. "Just push on, Scottie. All we can do is brazen it out. They'll think we're reinforcements for the front. Over."

"*One wee thing, boss. We're goin' t' wrong way for tha'. Over.*"

Hawksby grinned. "A technicality, Panther One, a technicality. Out."

Eva leaned over from the back. "Do you t'ink we make it before daylight, Alan?"

"Not if you don't keep down, we won't. And keep that blonde hair of yours well-covered. Turn up your collar."

She wrinkled her nose. "Yes, boss!"

Suddenly Pogo Perkis hit the brakes.

"What is it?" Hawksby demanded, but with the improving light he could answer his own question.

Thunder rumbled like heavy artillery as the tropical storm gathered its strength out over the Gulf. In the occasional

lightning flash, the major could distinguish Panther One a few hundred yards ahead. Perkis had stopped behind a queue of scrawny cattle. The weather had made them jittery and the old herdsman couldn't stop them from blocking the track completely.

McDermid was first to realise that the hold-up had been a blessing in disguise. Even as he began to radio back to Panther Two, Hawksby saw half-a-dozen Iranian troopers emerge from the cluster of mud dwellings ahead.

Pogo nudged him. He pointed to a copse of scraggy acacia trees beyond the dwellings. The big Chinook helicopter had been parked carefully, out of view from the road. But its unmistakable outline shape was impossible to hide in the first glimmerings of dawn light.

Hawksby cut through McDermid's warning: "I know, Scottie. They're waiting for *us*! We're backing up, follow as best you can. Out."

His words were drowned by the grating of gears and the shriek of the propshaft as Pogo went hard into reverse.

Blake pointed behind them. "We crossed a bridge about a quarter of a mile back! It crossed over a wadi! Could we use that?" His voice ended in a scream to make himself heard.

Hawksby thought for a moment. It made good sense. Their destination was a sheltered cove on the other side of the coastal high ground. There the Boat Troop team would be waiting. Rather than go round it, they would use the dried-up river bed to go up it. And then make their way down the other side to the sea. At least it would by-pass the Iranian reception party.

They drew level with the old stone bridge and Pogo peered over the parapet. Twelve feet below just a thin trickle of water slurped over the stony river bed. "Looks okay, boss," he reported.

Hawksby nodded. "Right, lead on. Scottie can come up the rear."

The Fijian shoved the gear into first and swung over the embankment, his face set in a grim mask as the heavy vehicle half-drove and half-slid down the soft, sandy gradient. Ahead the wadi wormed its way up to the coast hills.

ISFAHAN: 0530 hrs, Tuesday 23rd September

Colonel Murad had spent the rest of the night on a canvas camp-bed in his small office at the villa in Isfahan.

It had been an uncomfortable time, but it had been more than compensated for when he awoke to the urgent shout of his aide.

"News, *agha*! News!"

Wearily Murad lifted his feet from the bed and placed them on the floor, before he looked up at the grinning face of the young officer.

"What's all the excitement? I hope it's worth waking me at this unholy hour."

"Just minutes ago, *agha*, we spotted our mysterious enemy," the aide announced proudly, as though it had been his personal achievement. "Down on the coast near the village of Berid. A herdsman was interrogated and reported seeing them heading west along a wadi into the hills overlooking the Gulf. It was only minutes previously."

Murad carefully buttoned up his trousers. He didn't wish to rush with unseemly haste at what might turn out to be another false alarm. "Point the exact position out on the map, my friend."

Eagerly the aide obliged. "Here, *agha*, here!" He jabbed a finger at the coast, just north of Lavar Kabkan.

"Mmmm," Murad said thoughtfully. "I see there is a cove on the other side of those hills, which may be a suitable place for a landing. Their destination perhaps?" He turned quickly. "Do we not have a helicopter in the area?"

"We do, *agha*!"

"Good, then we can make use of it. I want our men hard on the heels of our mysterious friends, and our patrol boat brought up to cut them off at the cove."

Slowly and with a distinct hint of menace in his voice, he added: "At last, we . . . *have* . . . them!"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

ZAGROS: 0600 hrs, Tuesday 23rd September

"CHRIST! They're gaining on us!" Kangers Webster yelled.

McDermid twisted in his seat to make his own assessment. There was no disagreeing with the Australian. The pursuing Iranian jeep was making a determined effort to catch them, helped by its lighter load. Its almost reckless speed along the wadi was only possible because of the relatively smooth surface.

"Shall I blast 'em, Scottie?" Kangers demanded.

"No! I dunna want their friends knowing our location." He thought for a moment. Hawksby's vehicle was some way ahead and it was possible that the enemy didn't realise there were two Land Rovers. He nudged Perkis. "Could y' shake 'em off, Jim?"

The driver didn't look too happy at the suggestion. "I dunno, Scottie. Bleedin' risky."

"It might give t'others a wee chance." Coaxing.

"Aw, blimey. You can bloody soft-talk me into anything. 'Old tight, everyone . . .!"

As he finished speaking he snatched the handbrake and swung the wheel. Panther One bounced up the shallow embankment of the wadi and onto the hillside slope. Anxiously he looked for a suitable spot to turn, and as he found it, he ground the accelerator into the floorboards. A cloud of dust spewed up behind the thrashing rear wheels. He approached a particularly steep incline and began to execute a careful three-point turn as though he was taking a civilian driving test, but taking care to reverse up the slope.

The fast-approaching Iranian jeep was close behind, and

the driver suddenly realised that the strange pink Land Rover was trying to out-manoeuvre him by doubling back on itself.

The Persian saw that his only chance was to close the gap by cutting directly across the slope. Had he been properly trained in mountain driving, he would have known the dangers of turning a vehicle round on a steep slope. He would also have understood why the driver of the strange vehicle was making such a careful straight-line manoeuvre. Swinging the wheel, so that the jeep was straddled horizontally across the slope, he instantly realised his mistake. The uppermost wheels gently lifted as gravity took command and the vehicle began to topple. Both driver and passenger, taken by surprise, lost their grip and were poured out of the vehicle in an ungainly heap. The upturned machine rolled over them, crushing their bodies remorselessly as it began barrelling down the slope.

Perkis had stopped and watched, fascinated by the macabre sight. "Gawd, Scottie. That was 'orrible."

"I blame you." McDermid was grinning. "C'mon, y' great fairy, let's see if y' canna catch up wi' t' Hawk."

Seconds later, Panther One was bouncing hard across country, running alongside the wadi. After ten minutes the familiar shape of the other Land Rover appeared ahead down in the wadi. It was stationary. Perkis slammed on the brakes. "What's up?" McDermid asked.

Two figures were crouched by the rear offside wheel of Panther Two. It was John Belcher who turned around. "We've fucked up the rear axle, old lad! Bloody great pot-hole."

Perkis killed the engine and scrambled down the wadi embankment. "Let's 'ave a look-see . . ."

Hawksby stood up from examining the damage. "Forget it, Jim. I'm afraid this old charabanc isn't going any farther."

The Cockney glanced up the slope, tilting his head to one side, his eyes alert. "Hey boss, none of us is goin' any place if we don't get out!"

Hawksby listened. Water. Dammit! It was always a risk to use the dried-up river beds at the start of the rainy season.

But using them to keep out of view of their pursuers had levelled the odds. Until now. Somewhere in those distant hills it must have rained. Heavily.

He grabbed Eva and hauled her out of her seat. "Quick, up the embankment! And you, Jonathan, MOVE IT!"

They stared at him as though he was mad, not comprehending. Then they saw the urgency with which the others began off-loading vital equipment.

Pogo Penaia said solemnly: "I'll set a charge."

"Be sharpish," Hawksby replied, pushing Blake towards the embankment.

Belcher scrambled up the wadi side, loaded down with weapons and a medical bag while Hawksby scooped up the few remaining secret papers and ciphers. There were few maps left, as it was routine practice to destroy each one once they had crossed the territory concerned.

Perkis smashed the Skywave set and the vehicle's Clansman.

Pogo was sorting out a fuse. "Hey, Jim, take my gun and that bag. I got my last Mars bar in it."

Perkis obliged and headed for the edge of the wadi.

Then it happened.

Hawksby had seen it before in Oman. Perkis had only heard about it. He knew how it happened and the speed with which it occurred, but still it took him by surprise. Pogo, too, had witnessed once what happened when a dried-out watercourse, that had been bone hard for months or years, was suddenly fed with water from distant hills. But he had never thought of it happening to him.

Until the last moment the noise of the approaching torrent had been muted by the distant thunder. Only as the solid wall of mud-brown water rounded the bend like a mammoth helter-skelter did he realised it was upon him.

"POGO!" Perkis screamed.

A giant ten feet high fist of water smashed the Fijian square in the face as he looked up from setting the fuse. Its sheer force hurled him before it as contemptuously as a rag doll. The streaming eruption passed on regardless like an express train on a downhill run. Water creamed around

Perkis's legs, trying to pluck him in too. Kangers yanked him to safety and the vortex swirled past, dragging Panther Two with it. For a moment it was as though the trusty Land Rover had a mind of its own, determined to resist. Then it began to shift and move away with the current. A dead sheep floated after it.

"Oh, my God," Blake breathed. "Poor bugger didn't stand a chance."

Eva Olsen opened her mouth. She could find no words.

No one else said a thing. Hawksby felt sick.

Perkis stared after the raging torrent in disbelief. Then he looked down at the canvas bag by his feet, and the Mars bar that had tumbled out.

As they climbed aboard a heavily over-laden Panther One there was a dull distant *crump* and a flicker of brightness farther down the reborn tributary as Pogo's demolition charge blew on the lost Land Rover. Even in death the Fijian had done no less than what was expected of him.

It was in grim mood that Perkis drove the vehicle westwards up the lower slopes of the coastal hills. An irrational feeling was growing at the back of his mind that he would never get to see his new son. He tried to ignore the evidence that the enemy was closing in, but he couldn't dispel his fears. There had been one cock-up after another; it was as though the fickle gods of war were conspiring against them. First Forbsie and now Pogo Penaia. God knows how many SAS-hardened years of battle experience and training behind them. Unflappable, indestructible. That's how they had always seemed.

In the regiment you were trained to fight against everything, starting with your own human frailties. Coping with adversity and turning it to advantage was a stock-in-trade. But what could you do if fate and luck were stacked against you? He knew the very thought was a blasphemy, and the fact that it had even entered his head had appalled him. But noticing the solemn silence that had fallen over the others, he knew he was not alone. Even the Hawk looked pale and drawn, and there was a weariness in those normally penetrating and alert eyes.

The silence was broken by McDermid. "Chopper!" he shouted suddenly.

Dawn had brought another day of harsh, tropical sunlight. It was against a deepening ultramarine skyline that they saw the heavy Chinook transport helicopter hovering like a giant insect. Hawksby had been studying his last remaining map of the area. "Pull over, Jim," he said quickly. "Let's find some cover."

The driver had already located a likely spot, a hollow in the gradient that would screen them from the troops disgorging from the helicopter. He picked his way into the shelter of the rock and switched off the engine.

Instinctively, all eyes turned towards Hawksby. He sounded confident as he spoke. "I'm afraid it's time to destroy the vehicle and finish the job on foot. Now the sun's up there's precious little cover in these hills. If it's any consolation, it's only about ten miles to the RV."

"Not exactly downhill though, is it?" Blake said, looking at the distant ridge. He felt exhausted just thinking about the trudge under the Gulf sun.

McDermid nudged him. "It'll make a man o' ye!"

Hawksby suppressed a grin. It was good to have the tough Glaswegian with them. His dour humour, when it could be understood, was a palatable tonic. No one else felt much like joking, but now the major could sense the mood of the group lightening.

Eva asked: "Do you t'ink t'ey know where we iss? I mean t'at 'elicopter wass putting men down . . ."

Hawksby didn't want to harp on negative aspects. After losing Pogo, morale was low enough. "They only know our rough position, otherwise we'd have come under fire by now. But even if they close in on us on the coast, we'll be at our destination. And that means as good as out. So cheer up. All is not lost." He smiled reassuringly at everyone, but the returning expressions showed doubts. "Okay," he added suddenly, "we'll take only vital kit and distribute it between us all. Jonathan and Eva, I hope you don't mind taking something?"

"Do we have a choice?" Blake asked. He hadn't meant it to

sound carping, but it did.

"Not really," Hawksby replied, smiling, and handed him spare water carriers.

"How's your arm?" John Belcher asked Kangers.

The Austrian was taken aback. "Thought you'd forgotten about that. Bloody decent of you t' ask. Why, you gonna carry me to the RV?"

Belcher shook his head sadly. "Afraid not, old boy. If you're too weak to walk, I'm afraid we'll have to shoot you."

"I do believe you mean that, Butcher," the other drawled. "Thanks, but I'll manage."

The journey was less strenuous than nerve-racking. It was conducted in a series of slow leopard crawls between the patches of meagre cover offered by the bald, desiccated landscape. Hawksby and Perkis led the way, moving to each point offering shelter, where they would wait with firearms cocked to give covering fire in the event of attack. Once they were in position, Eva and Blake followed with McDermid, who hissed instructions on the elbows-and-knees movement and constantly warned them to keep their backsides down.

When they had joined the party on 'point', the end-group of Belcher and Kangers would wait, with weapons readied, until Hawksby and Perkis had wormed their way on to the next resting place. All the SAS troopers had smoke grenades at the ready in case the helicopter decided to make a nuisance of itself. If it had, the streams of green smoke would have obliterated the landscape long enough for Blake and the girl to make a dash for freedom.

That was a risk to be taken only in dire emergency. To prevent such a surprise Tiger had gone solo, remaining at the bottom of the hillside to watch for any elements in pursuit. The little man from Nepal had immediately volunteered for the role and no one argued. However much they trained, they'd never quite match the stealth and natural aptitude of the Gurkha. It was quietly understood by all, although no one actually admitted it. While he waited, Tiger set a timed demolition charge with the remaining plastic explosive that would vaporise the abandoned Land Rover.

After an hour of reasonable progress, Hawksby indicated back down to McDermid to approach with added caution.

The Scot's big hand slapped hard down on Eva's bottom as she wriggled across the tract of exposed hillside.

Keeping her belly touching the earth she strained painfully on, trying to keep her mind off her upper thighs, which felt as though they were going to part company with her groin. As she reached the patch of scrub, she turned back to face McDermid as he joined them. There were tears of pain in her eyes. "You, Corporal, iss a bastard!"

He grinned and put a finger to his lips, anxious to find out the reason for Hawksby's warning. "There's a whole line of 'em, Scottie," the major said. "They've fanned out since the chopper dropped them. Now they're combing down the hillside towards us. Nearest one's about a mile away."

He turned back to the others. "I've been looking at the map. There might be a way round them." McDermid frowned. It was unusual for the Hawk to hesitate if he had a bright idea. Although, for the life of him, the Scotsman didn't see what the exposed windswept landscape had to offer.

The major pointed out a large natural indentation in the hillside a quarter of a mile from where they sat. "There's a *qanat*, Scottie. Over there. It runs right under the hillside for miles. It would bring us up behind those Iranians as they come down."

McDermid knew then why Hawksby had hesitated. His blood ran cold.

"I dunna ken I've got t' bottle fer this, boss," McDermid muttered as they scrambled down to the sheltered *maqsam*: artistically-laid bricks formed a neat archway around the mouth of the *qanat*, from which the cool water cascaded, splashing into a shallow stone pool. At the far end of it a series of low, dividing piers separated the water into channels to serve different villages in the valley below.

"Blimey," Perkis said, sitting in the shade of the solitary mulberry tree. "'Ow far d'you say it goes boss?"

"This one is just seven miles," Hawksby replied. "Horizontal and straight into the hillside. Then, of course, it's

joined by the vertical down-shafts. I plan to go up the last one of them, which will bring us out near the peak."

"Jesus wept," Kangers breathed. "That'll be like climbin' up a bleedin' waterfall."

Hawksby shook his head. "No, *qanats* aren't natural rivers as such. They don't tap springs or anything. They just collect condensation from the high ground and bring it together in one place to irrigate the farms. Damn clever really. Those vertical shafts were used by the builders to take out excavated earth. And for maintenance, of course. And they're used as wells . . ."

"Still," Kangers muttered, "having seen what happened to that wadi, I betcha they're goin' to be a bit wet. It's been rainin' somewhere round here, that's fer sure!"

"It'll be a bit damp," Hawksby conceded.

McDermid took a deep breath. He'd always loathed the flooded waterpipe in training. Everyone had a pet fear and his was tunnels. Tunnels were the things he had 'bad dreams' about. For others it was something different. Kangers Webster, he knew, had made over a thousand parachute jumps, but he still couldn't sleep well the night before.

At that moment Tiger emerged from the vegetation that grew alongside the irrigation canals. He didn't look too happy. "They closing, boss," he said simply. "But they come slow. Cautious. With luck we have maybe half-hour."

Hawksby took stock. Just thirty minutes before troops moving up the valley met those coming down. Then they would realise that their prey had disappeared somewhere in between. The *qanat* would be an obvious hiding place, but not necessarily an obvious route of escape.

"I'm afraid," the major said, "that if we attempt just to hide until nightfall, we'll be found. Our only chance is to move deep inside the hills and scale one of the wall shafts." Blake gave Eva a reassuring hug, but both looked apprehensive. "It'll be no worse than potholing. These *qanats* are centuries old, and we'd have to be pretty unlucky for the whole thing to collapse. The biggest danger is from panic, so for God's sake, try and keep your heads no matter what." He

addressed himself to Blake and Eva. "We've all done caving, so you're in safe hands. As long as you do *exactly* what you're told. Remember, if anything does go wrong, there are shafts at regular intervals both in front and behind you. Any collapse is unlikely. And a collapse that blocked all means of escape would be damned unlucky."

"What if we get stuck in t'e 'ole?" Eva asked. Earnestly.

"No' much chance o' tha' wi' ye, lassie," McDermid replied. He'd meant it to sound comforting; it just sounded lewd.

Hawksby ignored the remark. "The body does swell when immersed, but muscle control is the more important factor. That's why I said you must keep calm. We'll send the biggest chap through first though, just to make sure."

"Thanks a million," Kangers muttered. "Have you noticed how the English always put us Aussies or the Scots in every bloody spearhead . . ."

"Stow it!" McDermid hissed. The prospect of this burrowing operation was preying on his mind; the sooner they got started, the sooner it would be over.

"The biggest threat is from the rains," Hawksby continued. "but last night's storm appeared to be out at sea, although it looks like those hills caught some of it. As we saw, the streams take the brunt. However, as moisture soaks through, it might affect this *qanat*. By how much we can only guess. Nevertheless, at the first sign of a rise in water level, we'll stay put at a well-shaft. Again, I remind you that they are spaced fairly closely, so don't get alarmed unduly." Hawksby turned to Kangers. "Don't worry, I'll be right behind you. We'll give our belt-orders to the others, so we're carrying as little as possible. Especially anything that can get us jammed in a tight spot."

"Sweet Jesus," Blake breathed. "This can't be happening."

But within a few minutes, the weird expedition had begun. Kangers Webster led the way into the dark mouth of the *qanat*, wading against the noisy flow of clear water and playing his rubberised torch over the six feet arch. Immediately behind came Hawksby, then Tiger. As the team's

most proficient mountaineer, the task of scaling one of the well-shafts would fall to him.

Next followed John Belcher, loaded with a bundle of straightish branches hewn from the mulberry tree at the *maqsam*. These would be used to cross any deep troughs in the tunnel, or for shoring-up any suspect sections, or even as angle-joists to be wedged across the well-shaft, providing footholds for the ascent.

Blake and Eva Olsen followed next, carrying the leading members' belt-packs. McDermid and Jim Perkis brought up the rear, their Uzis at the ready in case they were followed into the tunnel.

It was an eerie sensation as the bright light of the entrance hole receded and finally disappeared around a bend. Torchlight threw distorted shadows on the crumbling walls. The only sound was the urgent gurgle of water around their knees and the occasional sound of equipment brushing against the earth sides. The smell of damp soil filled the air.

Imperceptibly the muddy bed began to incline, but the roof stayed level, forcing the column to walk at a slight crouch. It made the going more difficult, but no one complained. The absence of a speaking voice heightened the sense of isolation. It was the concentrated silence of unspoken fear. The walls of the *qanat* seemed to press in again. Hunched shoulders were rubbing against the moist earth of the roof. Despite the torches it seemed very dark and it was getting darker.

Ahead someone let out a yelp of surprise. A wild flapping sound resounded down the tunnel.

Instinctively Eva ducked. "God! What wass t'at?" Behind her, McDermid, too, had reacted in the same way. He could have well believed it was some subterranean beast unknown to mankind. "Jest a bat, I expect," he said.

"Oh, God, I 'ad never t'ought of t'at!" she replied.

"It was just a bird, luv," Perkis' voice piped up from the back. "S'pect 'e was more frightened than us."

"Speak fer y'self, lad," McDermid hissed.

Perkis played the light from his torch over the roof above their heads. "Look, them's the bats. 'Undreds of the little

bleeders. No bigger 'n butterflies."

Eva shrieked.

"Cut it OUT!" McDermid thundered. "We can do wi'oot y' nature lessons, thank y', lad!"

The girl was down on her knees in the water, splashing about, trying to brush imagined bats from her hair.

"It's all right, Scottie," Perkis protested. "They'll stay put if we don't disturb 'em."

McDermid helped Eva to her feet, feeling distinctly queasy himself. "I'll bleedin' disturb ye, Perkis, if y' dunna shut y' gob!"

Stumbling around the next bend, they saw the welcoming dazzle of sunlight from the first well-shaft. Relieved, they clambered forward as the tunnel opened out.

"There, see!" Perkis was delighted. He splashed across to a rocky ledge where a bird's nest had been built. He peered in. "Eggs. Pied Wagtail, I reckon. Ol' Kangers must've scared 'er off. Don't reckon it matters. Too late in the season. Probably won't 'atch any'ow."

"I dunna care if it's a bleedin' dodo's nest y've discovered, lad. Just get on, will y'?"

The light relief was short-lived. Once they had left the well-head, the pool of light had quickly disappeared and, once again, the tunnel closed in. The flow of water had increased noticeably and they frequently found themselves wading waist high in water. They came across more well-shafts, but now the sunlight failed to penetrate. At each one the circle of sky above became smaller as they moved deeper and deeper under the hills.

Ahead, Kangers Webster came across the first real obstacle. He discovered that the floor of the tunnel dropped away deceptively beneath the black surface of the water. Gingerly, he put a foot forward and placed it down. It didn't hit bottom and Hawksby caught him in time to prevent him falling.

"Reckon it goes to the centre of the bleedin' earth," the Australian observed.

Swimming the thirty feet of collapsed floor was a gruelling business which left everyone soaked and depressed. It also

served to slow them down considerably – a delay they could ill afford.

As they pressed on, it was Perkis who first saw the outline of someone's head peering over the rim of a well-head high above. It was so far distant that it was impossible to tell if it was a child from a local village, or an adult. But as he heard something dropped, bouncing noisily against the sides of the shaft, he feared the worst.

"Someone at the well-head!" he hissed at McDermid. "Tell 'em to speed it up." But, before the message reached the front of the column, there was an explosion behind them that set their ears ringing. The shockwave from the blast expanded down the tunnel, forming a solid wall of displaced air. It toppled everyone forward like ninepins, as loose stones and smoke chased them into the darkness. Shrapnel sang in the confined space.

Perkis cursed as he felt the metal slivers whip at his back. Something stung behind his right knee and his leg gave way, pitching him face-forward into the water.

"Oh, stuff me . . .!" McDermid could hardly believe his eyes as the fragile roof soil started to shower into the stream behind them. "COLLAPSE!" he warned, feverishly hauling Perkis from the water. Blake lent a hand while Eva repeated the warning to the rest of the party, who had disappeared from sight. Thick clouds of dust rolled towards them.

For McDermid, it was coming face-to-face with his one and only personal phobia. As the blanket of dust enveloped them, blotting out the torchlight and working its way into ears, nose and mouth, he felt as though he would suffocate. For a moment, he panicked, tempted to leave Perkis at his feet and run. He was brought to his senses by the plaintive, choking voice of Eva. "Corp-or-al Sc-ott-ie!"

Sand-blind, he finally hauled Perkis clear of the water. Summoning strength beyond the natural capabilities of his wiry frame, he heaved the hapless trooper forward. "Put somethin' round y' mouth, lassie!" he cried, unable to follow his own advice. He collided with Eva in the swirling, orange murk. She reached forward to help, but Blake pushed her aside.

"Join the others, quick!" he said and grabbed Perkis' other arm.

"I'm obliged," McDermid muttered, as he struggled on with the body.

From some distance ahead came another deep-throated roar. The whole tunnel trembled. Earth trickled from the roof.

"Christ," Blake said. "Was that another grenade?"

McDermid spat sand from his mouth. "Aye, lad, reckon they're tryin' te bury us alive."

"Looks like they've succeeded." Blake was surprised at the calm resignation in his voice. Like most people, he had wondered how he would face death whenever it came to him. He'd never guessed it would be like this – that he could accept it so quietly.

The tunnel was wider now. The flow of water had been stopped and much of the dust had settled thickly on the surface, rapidly turning it to liquid sludge. He managed to get Perkis' arm around one shoulder. The young Cockney tried to shake off the numbness in his head. He knew he was concussed and he knew he'd swallowed a gallon of water. Stupidly, he recalled the small fish he'd seen in the stream and wondered if he'd swallowed any. He tried to say thanks to whoever was carrying him, but when he opened his mouth, he just felt sick.

"Okay, don't talk," Blake said kindly. "We'll have you out of here in no time."

McDermid was surprised by the journalist's attitude. It wasn't in keeping. "We will?"

Blake laughed harshly – an incongruous sight in a mud-and-blood-streaked face. "Course we will – Corp. What is your lot's motto: 'Dare to be great'?"

"Somethin' like tha'."

Light glowed through the dust-laden air. It was Hawksby. "Are you all right?" he demanded, shining his torch.

"Your driver's been injured," Blake replied.

"It's nothin' much," McDermid added.

Perkis managed a weak laugh. "I'll be the judge of that . . . What's happened up front, boss?"

Hawksby waved aside the choking clouds. "Like what

happened back here, I imagine. A collapse. But Tiger and Kangers are trying to dig a way through."

"What iss our chances?" Eva asked. She didn't sound hopeful.

"Ask again in ten minutes," he answered tersely. "Meanwhile it'll help if we can join the others and form a crocodile to clear away the debris where they're working."

"I use stave to make hole," Tiger reported. "I get through to other side of fall. At least now we get air."

"Thank J.C. for that," Kangers muttered as he struck his entrenching tool into the soft silt. His back was dripping with sweat. McDermid was frustrated that there was barely room for two to work at a time. "It'll take Rolf Harris here a month-a bleedin' Sundays to get through. Put y' back into it, lad, y' no diggin' the Piccadilly Line extension."

"Sod off, Mac," Kangers replied. "We're through now, anyway."

Thankfully he slung down the short spade and shone his torch through the aperture.

"Well?" McDermid demanded impatiently. He was convinced that the entire tunnel would collapse at any moment.

"It's not the well-shaft," Kangers mumbled, half to himself. "The wall's collapsed into the shaft, I reckon, and created a new pocket. Sorta by-pass. I think . . . yes . . . I think we can get back into the tunnel at the other end. Bit dodgy though. This pocket is just loose soil. One sneeze 'n' the lot'll come down."

Hawksby was relieved. "You volunteering, Kangers?"

The Australian chuckled. "Threatenin' me with RTU, eh? Okay."

He wormed his way into the eighteen-inch hole and through the newly-created chamber. The others followed gingerly, not daring to look up, ignoring the constant sprinkling of soil from the unsafe ceiling.

Hawksby was last through. "Hellfire, I don't *ever* want to do *that* again!"

"Nonsense, boss," McDermid said, his bravado returning. "Ought te make it standard induction trainin' in future."

At least from the well-head above, it would appear as though there was no way past the shaft. Hawksby consoled himself with the thought. But if they had been given a reprieve, they had also been given another problem. With the *qanat* now blocked in two places, the water level was rising dramatically. It was happening too fast for them to have a chance of reaching the next shaft before the water reached the roof of the tunnel. They were also slowed by a wounded man.

Just beyond the collapse, the tunnel fanned out into an elongated cavern. At least it gave them the chance to rest and to look at Perkis' injuries. While they were doing that, Hawksby sent McDermid and Tiger back to try and create a new watercourse around the collapse.

"A piece of shrapnel's pierced a ligament," Belcher said, inspecting the back of Perkis' knee. "Not much I can do here, except strap it up tight. His back looks worse than it is. Peppered with steel fragments, but nothing serious. His son and missus can spend many happy hours picking the pieces out for years to come."

"Don't soddin' talk about me as if I ain't 'ere, Butcher!"

Belcher smiled mischievously. "Just think yourself lucky, old man, you didn't get yourself an impromptu vasectomy back there."

"Leave it out, yer bleedin' quack. Just get on wiv it." Perkis purposely ignored the medic, and turned instead to Blake. "Thanks, mate, by the way. It was pretty 'airy back there an' I'd 'ave understood if you'd just bolted an' left me to it."

Blake looked embarrassed. "I reckon all this derring-do rubs off after a while." He tried to make light of it. "Mind you, I still reckon you blokes must be bloody mad to do this sort of thing for a living."

Ten minutes later, Hawksby decided to risk it to the next well-shaft. The water level had not risen for some time, and it was worth a gamble. There was no way back and, if the water rose any more, they would be entombed three hundred feet below Iranian soil in a watery grave. Not a pleasant way to go.

Only one serious obstacle came between them and the next well-shaft. A stretch of the *qanat* had obviously suffered a cave-in at some earlier time and the tunnel was reduced to a mere eighteen-inch circle. Swollen by the earlier storm, the onrush of water filled it completely. It was Tiger who volunteered to try and get through. He was the smallest and undoubtedly the best swimmer. For a full minute the little Gurkha thrashed in the flooded tube before he reached the other side. It had been touch and go. But now, roped to each other through the hole, it was just possible to be hauled through in half-a-minute. Provided, of course, that the swimmer did not panic.

Surprisingly, only Perkis did. His crippled leg dragged behind him, slowing him down until he felt that his lungs would explode. Hawksby had ducked in after him and given a mighty shove which sent the younger man bobbing up through the surface of water of the tunnel beyond.

"Now keep quiet everyone," Hawksby warned. "We're nearing the well-shaft and sound travels down here. I don't give a damn what happens – even if you're attacked by water snakes – scream in *total* silence."

Tension at the thought of escaping from their underground confinement charged the humid atmosphere of the *qanat*. Tiger edged forwards to where the faint glimmer of distant daylight outlined the mouth in the roof of the tunnel. Stepping nimbly onto Kangers' cradled hands, he reached up for a handhold on the rocky side of the vertical three hundred foot shaft.

When his feet were astride the shaft, he began moving up like a ferret in a rabbit-hole, selecting foothold after foothold with remarkable agility, occasionally showering those below with dislodged earth. Every now and again he would stop and use the string of interlinked toggle ropes to haul up one of the staves. They had been a hellish nuisance on the trip, but now they proved their worth, jammed across the shaft to provide welcome security and steps for the inexperienced climbers.

Belcher muttered to no one in particular: "I hope he remembers to come back for the rest of us."

Tiger Ratna had other things on his mind as he approached the last twenty feet below the well-head. The dazzling brightness of the sky was a welcome sight, but he was more concerned with what might be waiting for him at the top. He slowed his pace, feeling increasingly confident as he edged his way up the last few feet, the blade of the *kukri* clamped between his teeth. Vaguely he wondered if his late father could see him now? Wondered if he had felt the same cool self-assurance and superiority over the enemy when he had stalked Japs in the Burmese jungle. Now Tiger continued the family tradition, an almost monastic existence devoted to soldiery; the warrior caste from the foothills of Nepal.

He caught the body scent in his nostrils. Downwind. Not far. A prickle of anticipation crawled down his spine. Very slowly he shifted his left foot to a new position, resting on a protruding knob of rock. His muscles tightened to take his weight and he inched upward.

Then he caught another waft. Cigarette smoke. Cheap. Tinged with something else. The liquorice smell of graphite oil. That meant guns. Guns that had been recently cleaned and checked. Good men. He heard someone chuckle. Maybe not that good, he thought. Finally Tiger's hair appeared, encircled in the camouflaged bandana. But with his head tilted right back so that he could look down his nose, there was precious little of him to see. After a while what there was dipped out of sight again.

For a moment he thought about the scene indelibly etched in his mind's eye. A barren, sun-scorched hillslope sizzling in the unrelenting midday haze. Not a breath of wind. Sky more white than blue. Patches of shrivelled scrub almost as brown as the dun-coloured earth. Next to the well-head the simple wooden windlass, like a giant frame-constructed bobbin, which lowered the goatskin bags down into the *qanat*, had been cast aside. Two men sat on the ground, supporting their backs against one of the struts. The soldiers had their backs to him, facing away down to the distant river valley. Farther down the slope dark specks were gathered around another well-head. No doubt it was where the grenades had been

thrown in. From that distance he couldn't be sure, but he had the impression someone was being lowered down.

Presumably they were only expecting to find corpses, because the two troopers in front of him were obviously not thinking anyone would crawl out this far up the *qanat*. Not for the first time, Tiger wondered at the stupidity of professional soldiers around the world. Even in peacetime their lives could depend on vigilance. They were in the profession dedicated to the destruction of the most cunning, savage beast on earth: fellow man. Yet everywhere they had the arrogance to assume that no one would dare to strike them down.

Dimly he recalled his father's words, many years before. 'When you join the Gurkhas you marry into the martial arts. For your life will never be the same as for other men. You will never cease to be watchful and wary. You will go about your business with a respect and single-mindedness that will astound others. And you will practise and refine your skills with dedication and the ferocity of a mountain cat. Because you know that you are better than any warrior pitted against you, you will not fear.'

He slid over the rim of the well-head on his belly like a snake, swinging his feet up clear of the surrounding stones. Now crouched, he stepped forward tentatively. A basking lizard, which was perfectly camouflaged, scuttled away from him and into the cover of some rocks. He froze. The two soldiers appeared not to hear the movement; they continued chatting in low voices. In total silence, he unslung the Uzi sub-machine gun. He had already decided that was how he was going to deal with them. There was no one else in immediate earshot and trying to tackle two with the *kukri* in total silence left room for mistakes. And Tiger Ratna did not make mistakes. As his father had always warned him, a Gurkha only ever made one mistake. His last.

Phut! Phut! The first seated soldier suddenly lunged forward awkwardly, half thrown by the force of the silenced 9 mm rounds that smashed into the back of his head. For a split second the other soldier thought his companion had fainted. He reached forward for him. Then he caught a glimpse of the

dishevelled figure hidden behind the windlass. *Phut*! The third shot missed its mark. As he opened his mouth to speak, he caught the fourth round squarely in the temple.

Tiger advanced quickly but with caution, kicking the Iranian's weapons out of arm's reach. The first soldier was stone dead. The second was still breathing.

He'd known it happen before. A bullet could pass in one temple and out through the other side, leaving the victim blind but alive. Without hesitation, Tiger took the *kukri* still clenched between his teeth and cut the man's throat with one deft blow.

It took the Gurkha only a few minutes' struggle to position the windlass back over the well-head and drop down the rope. It made the climb much easier for everyone, especially Eva, Blake and Perkis, who had little control over his right leg. At stages, they could rest on the cross-members formed by the staves before continuing the ascent.

Hawksby glanced at the corpses of the two Iranian soldiers. "No trouble?" he asked Tiger.

"No, boss. Them as good as gold."

"Get them out the way. I don't want to advertise our presence. Throw them down the well."

Blake protested. "That's village drinkwater."

"If you've got a better place," Hawksby said, glancing over the barren landscape, "it's fine by me. Don't worry, they'll soon find 'em when they start a search."

Blake glanced at Eva for support, but none was forthcoming. She was past the stage of caring and just wanted to be gone from this oven-baked land.

A mile farther up the hillside, the unbroken desolation of the lower slopes gave way to a thin covering of spindly acacias and poplars which provided some welcome shade and cover. They trudged on over the ridge, through a flooded watercourse that ran between two peaks. Beyond, the land fell away in a series of low, undulating hillocks to the Gulf, blinding white in a shimmering sea mist.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

PERSIAN GULF COAST: 1200 hrs, Tuesday 23rd September

From their hide beneath the upturned Raiders on the rendezvous beach, Captain Johnny Fraser's Sabre team maintained watch on the approaches with mounting tension.

Mark Benjamin, a good-humoured Jewish corporal with a mop of unkempt black hair, turned away from the observation periscope. "How long overdue are they, boss?"

"Five or six hours," Fraser replied. He was seated by the radio, anxiously awaiting the expected signal from Hawksby.

"They *must* have run into problems," Sergeant 'Brummie' Turner said emphatically.

"Hark at Cheerful Charlie!" Corporal Bill Mather added in disgust. An SAS veteran, he wasn't given to worrying unduly when missions didn't go to plan. As usual he took his mind off things by going through the unnecessary ritual of cleaning his gun. He'd only checked it over an hour earlier.

"Might be having transmission difficulties," suggested Benjamin, now back at the periscope.

Bill Mather wasn't convinced. "Not with Tiger on board. Signals wizard. Unlikely."

"Hey-ho," Benjamin said suddenly, pressing his eye closer to the rubber socket of the periscope. "It's party time, folks. A bleedin' great chopper's just landed with a couple o' dozen of Crazy K's men. Leapin' about all over the shop."

"*You're joking*!" Fraser was stunned. He had heard nothing above the noise of breaking surf.

"I don't make jokes about business," Benjamin answered evenly.

Already Mather and Brummie had begun rapidly stowing their kit ready to move. It was unlikely they'd be waiting for

nightfall now. Suddenly the earpiece of Fraser's Pocketfone, lying discarded by the larger Clansman set, crackled. He snatched it up.

"Snapdragon to Neptune, do you read? Over."

"Hawksby? Is that you?" Fraser demanded in disbelief.

"Sorry if I made you jump, Johnny. Our last Clansman got bent while we were pot-holing. Thank God you had the sense to keep this on. Over."

"Christ," Fraser said. "You must be close! How far? Over."

"About a mile," Hawksby replied. *"Transmission's a sod in these hills. Why d'you sound distraught? Over."*

"Two seconds ago a party of Iranians started stamping their big boots all over the RV area. Are you in trouble? Over."

"Just footsore. But we had a few close shaves. I'll tell you about it in the Mess one day. Your visitors must be the mob we shook off earlier. What's their position? Over."

"Hold on." Fraser said, and spoke to Mark Benjamin. "Hello, Snapdragon, listen. They've taken the high ground to the north of the cove. Appear to be setting up an ambush position. Right over your line of approach to us. Over."

A pause as the significance sank in. Then: "*Oh shit!*"

The Iranians had taken the high ground dominating the sandy cove and they directly overlooked the footpath that wound down through the scrub to the beach.

Whilst Hawksby was grateful for Johnny Fraser's timely warning, it hadn't solved the problem of how to get access to the RV, which itself lay directly under the enemy guns – although they did not yet appreciate that.

Fraser knew the ground well and had quickly made a suggestion that appeared to provide the only solution in the circumstances. Top priority must go to getting Blake and Eva Olsen out safely, but Hawksby did not want to leave anyone behind. And that looked like proving difficult with Perkis. Nevertheless, Hawksby decided, they would have to grin and bear it, and negotiate the rocky outcrop on the seaward side of the footpath, until they reached the beach. Although it was overlooked by the high ground, at least it

offered substantial hard cover, and was probably the least expected, and certainly most uncomfortable, route of approach.

As the SAS major and Fraser finalised their battle plan by radio, it was decided that only Hawksby and McDermid would remain near the path. They would offer diversionary fire whilst the remainder of the group began working their way around the outcrop. At the last moment the two remaining men would make a dash – straight down the path to the beach and, hopefully, board one of the Rigid Raiders before they left the shore.

Fraser had called up HMS *Antler* to advise them that the plans had been advanced. The commander was not amused. The rescue operation was meant to be in the dead of night, a secret and relatively safe operation, free from the risk of attack and international repercussions. Not least of his problems was that he was still cruising fifty miles offshore.

Hawksby glanced down at the pile of ammuniton by his feet. It had been grudgingly donated by the rest of the group, who now had no more than a single magazine apiece.

"Not a lot," McDermid observed.

"Better than nothing."

"I suppose we could always throw stones."

Hawksby settled down in the *sangar*, the circle of rocks which formed a natural fortress, and thumbed the last spare 9 mm rounds into a magazine. "Where are the others now?"

"I caught a glimpse o' the lassie's bum a coupla seconds ago. 'Boot halfway I'd say." He added appreciatively: "She's a tasty lass, boss, 'n' no mistake. Y'll have y' work cut oot wi' tha' one."

Absently Hawksby said: "Let's not bring that up again, Scottie."

"Aw, c'mon, boss. Mission's over, near enough. Good luck te ye, tha's what I say."

Hawksby half-smiled to himself. McDermid seemed sure enough they'd get out. He wished he could share the Scotsman's dogged confidence. Even more he wished they hadn't been forced to leave behind all the flares, grenades and

plastic explosive. He understood then why sub-machine guns were termed 'small arms'. Suddenly they seemed exactly that. Small.

He said: "I'd like you to know, Scottie – just in case we don't all get out of this – that I've been very pleased with the team. Despite the few ups and downs. Very pleased."

McDermid grunted as he studied the Iranian positions overlooking the cove. "We'll get out, boss, no trouble."

"I just wanted you to know. That's all."

The Scotsman twisted his lean sunburnt face around to look straight at Hawksby. His dark eyes were hard, the skin around them drawn tight and etched with exhaustion. "Y've been in this outfit quite a while, Major, but y've still a thing or two te learn aboot the men, if y'll forgive me for sayin'. An' aboot y'self."

Hawksby felt his own teeth grind. "Careful, Scottie, the mission might be over. Just be sure it's not your career as well."

McDermid snorted. "I'm no gettin' younger, boss. My time is limited, but y' might be leadin' future ops. So I dunna really give a damn."

The major said nothing. He stared unseeing at the Iranian positions. The corporal spoke slowly, selecting his words, "Y're respected throughout the regiment, Major, but it doesna make y' another Stirling. Ye like givin' orders an' dunna like listenin' te ideas from others. Y've messed up on aspects of plannin' and in some parts of the op itself. If y'd listened an' discussed more, maybe we'd have been out o' here b'noo. Y'canna handle the unexpected too well. Like now. Y're best when y've got the initiative. Bloody good. Like when I was wi' y' in Oman. So my advice is . . ." He hesitated.

Hawksby watched him, mesmerised by the clarity and perception of the Scotman's observations. He didn't like what he heard, but he knew it was largely true. Then he realised that McDermid was waiting for permission to finish. To give his verdict.

"Well?" the major said stiffly.

"Get te know y' men better, Major, and dunna frighten

'em off wi' tha' goddamn reserve o' yours – Sorry." Apologetic in case he'd gone too far. "Just trust us an' listen te us a wee bit more. An' y'll be as good as y' reputation. Hawk."

Quietly Hawksby said: "That it, Scottie?"

"Jest one more thing," McDermid said. "I hope we'll be servin' t'gether back in Oman soon."

Hawksby felt the very reserve that McDermid had criticised begin to form a defensive barrier. For once, he ignored it. "You think we could stand another tour together?"

McDermid almost smiled. "I think maybe we're just gettin' te know each other, boss."

Hawksby did smile. Perversely, he felt better.

"Comin' up fer time," McDermid reminded, glancing at his watch.

Grabbing his Uzi, Hawksby scrambled up to the wall of boulders. He exchanged glances with the Scotsman and nodded.

The languid air of the Persian Gulf was torn apart by the violent, staccato chatter of automatic fire. Opposite, an Iranian soldier, who had been peering down to the footpath for sight of the expected enemy, did a spectacular Hollywood stuntman dive down the rockface.

After a few seconds' delay, the Iranians began returning fire. It was sporadic at first, but rapidly gathered momentum. Dust plumes rose in the rocky *sangar* and ricochets whistled around them, terrifyingly close. The two men dropped back behind cover.

"That's woken them up," Hawksby observed.

"Bleedin' woken me up too," McDermid replied.

The Iranian firepower gathered in ferocity, raining about them. It was professional and concentrated, but at least it diverted the enemy's attention away from the party on the outcrop. In a few minutes the rest of Snapdragon would reach the cove itself. After a while the gunfire melted away as the troops sought confirmation of whether their targets had been hit. Plans would be made to work around behind them, cutting off their retreat to the sea.

Hawksby peered around a slab of rock and let off a three-second burst. "Just to let them know we're still here."

Then they knew the main group had reached the beach. There were shouts in Farsi as someone raised the alarm. Orders were yelled. They could hear shots going in a new direction, the sound more muted.

Then came the real surprise for the Iranians. On the cove in front of them a yawning hole appeared in the sand, as if from nowhere. As the men from the Boat Troop lifted up the two Rigid Raiders that had formed the improvised roof of the hide, the lightweight mortar inside belched rudely into action. It had been Johnny Fraser's idea to bring it for just such an emergency, despite the extra weight it added. It was planned to give a blast of covering fire until the few rounds they carried between them were exhausted.

The 60 mm Hotchkiss-Brandt commando mortar was wildly inaccurate when hand-held, but it was good enough to lob three phosphorous bombs into the base of the high ground. Instantly an impenetrable curtain of smoke wafted skyward. The Iranian positions disappeared from view.

Hawksby and McDermid sprayed their remaining ammunition into the smoke as the Hotchkiss-Brandt began to discharge high-explosive bombs in a high arc, disappearing into seething white fog in a series of bright flashes. Below them in the cove, Tiger and John Belcher were helping Fraser's men down to the water's edge whilst the others sought what cover they could in the rockpools. The shrill whirr of heavy-duty outboards drifted across the beach.

Hawksby nudged McDermid, who was loosing off his last clip. "C'mon! Time to join Fraser's frogs!"

The Scotsman slung down the spent Uzi and followed Hawksby over the *sangar* wall and down the steep slope to the footpath.

The last six feet was a sheer drop onto soft sand and sparvo grass. The high ground climbed away above their heads, still streaming white smoke from Fraser's last mortar bombs. They sprinted down the path, muscles pumping, hearts pounding and minds blank to everything except the need to get down the footpath and onto the open sand.

Then, as they reached the beach, the ground opened up

before them in a blinding flash. Wicked shrapnel fragments seared in all directions. Staggering under the impact, both men toppled into the smouldering mortar crater.

"Jesus!" breathed Hawksby. Blood was streaming from a deep cut in his forehead. He tugged at the steel splinter embedded in the bone. "What the sweet fuck's happened to Johnny's aim?"

McDermid peered out of the crater. "It isna our mortar. It's the soddin' mad mullah's." As if in confirmation, two more bombs detonated in close proximity. The earth trembled and more debris showered over them.

Hawksby looked out of the crater rim, through the drifting ribbons of smoke, to the shore-line. Already one Raider was standing clear of the beach. Eva's blonde hair was unmistakable. The second waited impatiently, bobbing in the swell, held by a cluster of men knee-deep in water. One of them was yelling, but his words weren't carrying. Nevertheless, the meaning was clear enough.

"They've zero'd in on us, Scottie," Hawksby rasped. "Move from here and we'll be cut to blazes." To emphasise the point, thick fire from a heavy machine gun ploughed into the sand ahead of them.

Momentarily McDermid shut his eyes. He always knew it would have to end sometime. In a second the smoke would clear and the Iranians would just have to adjust the mortar settings. A piece of cake.

"We'll have to chance it," Hawksby decided.

McDermid desperately tried to think why they shouldn't. His mind was blank. Small arms fire clattered high up on the inland slope. At that distance it sounded deceptively ineffectual. Hawksby frowned. He hadn't remembered seeing Iranian troops up there. Perhaps they'd spread out during the smoke bombardment?

"There's a truck up there," he muttered half to himself. Fraser had mentioned a helicopter, so these must be reinforcements. They must have come along the old coastal camel track.

"Oh sod," McDermid groaned. "There's another two dozen of t' bastards. Swarmin' all over t' fuckin' place."

Hawksby looked puzzled. The Iranian mortaring had ceased abruptly. "Why've they stopped?"

McDermid shielded his eyes from the sun. "Fuck me, they're shootin' at t' bloody mullah's lot! Stupid soddin' goons."

A smile creased Hawksby's lips. This was unbelievable luck. But, sure enough, a ragtail platoon of men were working their way down the slope, waving all manner of improvised weapons in the air. Only a couple of them appeared to have firearms, but they were putting them to good effect. The new arrivals were directed by a big bearded scruff who was standing apart from them with a rolled bundle over his shoulder. Beside him stood a woman, her flowing black *chador* looking strangely macabre against the sun-bleached rocks.

Hawksby nudged McDermid. "Whoever they are, it's a bloody godsend, Scottie. Let's get to the boats!"

They rushed out of the crater and pounded across the hard wet sand to the waiting Raider. The sound of crashing surf, dazzling in the sunlit mist of spume, filled their ears. They began wading out to where the SAS captain stood holding the bucking craft.

"COME ON!" Johnny Fraser yelled. "THIS IS THE LAST BUS TODAY!"

"I HAVNA GOT BLEEDIN' FLIPPERS!" retorted McDermid, losing his balance as a breaker foamed around him. He threw himself into the Raider. Willing hands grabbed him and hauled him unceremoniously aboard.

The outboard roared, throttling up. Hawksby jumped, helped by Fraser who followed him expertly over the side.

"Christ!" McDermid bawled. "HANG ON! IT'S FORBSY! I DUNNA BELIEVE IT! LOOK! IT FUCKIN' WELL IS!"

Hawksby couldn't believe his ears. Already the Raider was starting to tear a wake through the rollers, drenching them all in salt spray.

"TURN ROUND!" Johnny Fraser ordered.

Mark Benjamin threw the tiller, bringing them broadside-on to the beach. They crawled up the side of a wavecrest which threatened to turtle them. The trough opened up and

they swept into it, bracing themselves for the thunderous crash of the next roller.

Hawksby's eyes stung so he could hardly see. He could feel his skin already caked in salt. Two dark figures lumbered out from the shoreline, struggling against the tide. The water tugged at the woman's sodden *chador*, threatening to drag her back to the beach.

"TAKE IT BLOODY OFF!" There was no mistaking Forbes' voice. He was striding out behind her, a large bundle over his shoulder.

McDermid grinned broadly. "Soddin' typical!" He stood up in the craft. "ATTABOY, DAVE!" Fraser hauled him down again.

Free of the flowing robe, the woman struck out, now making better progress. She was strikingly dark and attractive, thought McDermid. Hawksby recognised Hameda immediately. Inching towards the Raider riding on the swell, she threw herself at the gunwhale. The craft dipped as she hooked herself over the edge, the hem of the black silk slip riding high over her voluptuous buttocks. Forbes, grinning widely, slapped them appreciatively, as he rolled her over onto the decking. He threw in the bundle from his shoulder.

McDermid was incredulous. "A bleddy Persian carpet? Christ, he coulda bleddy *flown* out!"

Forbes hauled himself up after the girl. McDermid and Hawksby grabbed him. Suddenly he stiffened. His eyes looked wide with surprise.

"What is it, man?" Hawksby demanded.

"Oh, shit, boss." He shut his eyes and bit his lower lip. Hard. "I've just bought one."

In the clamour of the raging surf, they could no longer hear the gunfire from the land. Benjamin threw open the throttle as Forbes was dragged aboard. Within moments, the craft drew along side the second and, together, looking like a pair of madcap dolphins, they slammed out hard against the incoming rollers. Out into the Persian Gulf.

"So where'd ye get y' wee private army, Davy?"

"Give us another swig of that brandy, Scottie, and I'll tell

you." Forbes was propped against the gunwhale of the Raider, his leg outstretched on the deck at a curious angle as Belcher did his best to strap it up. The sheer elation of being out of Iran and the liquor combined in a potent anaesthetic. Despite Belcher's protests he took another swig. "We recruited them way back inland. Volunteering for the front. You know, repel the Iraqi aggressors. We've been on the road for days. 'Course they didn't know which way I was going. Well, if they did suspect, no one said anything!

"Then, when we got here, we saw you lot in the middle of a raging bloody firefight." He threw a punch at Scottie and missed. "Can't leave you alone for a bloody minute, can I? Bloody Glaswegians 're all the same."

"How'd y' persuade 'em te attack?"

Forbes tapped his nose. "Told 'em the Iranians were a bunch of Iraqi infiltrators. Hell, they didn't know! Just did what I told 'em." He paused, took another draught, and sniffed. "Pity that. They were a nice bunch. Once you got to know 'em. Willin' fighters."

"Pity?" McDermid asked.

Forbes' eyes misted. "Our two Ingrams and a lot of sticks an' stones against a pro-Army detachment. That's the pity. Poor little fuckers'll be torn to bits. Won't stand a snowball's."

John Belcher looked up. "That's the best I can do, Dave. I'm afraid it's a right old Blighty one though."

Forbes ignored him. He was feeling woozy and hugged Hameda to him. She looked very fetching in the sodden slip that clung to her ample contours. "It'll heal," he said absently, and kissed her.

Belcher exchanged glances with Hawksby. The medic grimaced and shook his head. Modern high velocity rounds easily ripped off limbs. The sergeant would be lucky to keep his leg. The time had come for Dave Forbes and 22 Special Air Service Regiment to part company for good.

At last his head slumped between his shoulders and Belcher wrote the letter M for morphine on his forehead, the time and dosage.

Now that they were in calmer waters, Hawksby ordered

Benjamin to draw alongside the other craft so that he could go aboard.

"I t'ought we wass going to lose you t'en," Eva said, helping him to a seat.

Blake laughed. "That *would* be a shame, Major, after all this!"

Hawksby was pleased to see the journalist in good spirits. "I've avoided our Boat Troops for years, Jonathan. I get rotten sea-sick on a bloody pond."

Eva nudged Blake. "T'at would've put paid to your t'eories about the major's outfit, eh? Maybe t'ey iss 'uman after all, yes?"

"Just," conceded Blake good-humouredly. "Still, I can't pretend I won't be pleased to see the back of all of you."

"What will you do once you're back on *terra firma*?"

Blake looked puzzled. "That rather depends on you."

"Not on me, old boy," Hawksby replied. "My bit's finished. Perhaps the FO will want a word or two, but I guess you'll be free to go your own way."

"I hope you're right. If so, it'll be bath and meal. And a holiday, I guess."

"With Eva?"

The girl looked hard at the major. "You know t'e answer to t'at."

Hawksby felt uneasy. The others were watching. "Do I?"

Her eyes were bright. "Don't soldiers take 'olidays?"

His voice was firm. "Sometimes. With their wives."

But beneath the seat, out of view, her hand squeezed his. A silent question. He squeezed back. Long and hard.

"AIRCRAFT APPROACHING!" Benjamin shouted suddenly. "BEARING SOUTH-WEST. UNDOUBTEDLY HOSTILE!"

Before everyone had realised what was happening, the F4 Phantom was on them. It came screeching down in a shallow dive, pulling up just feet above the water, skimming the wavecrests as it approached. All eyes upturned as it flashed alongside, a mere fifty feet away, the exhaust blast from its twin engines thrashing up a storm in its wake. Spray scattered over the two craft.

"Iranian markings all right," Hawksby confirmed. He watched as the Phantom sped away, gaining height and tilting its wings to take it back towards the coast. Without an order being given everyone who had a weapon began loading it with magazines handed out by Fraser's Sabre team. If the aircraft came back to strafe, they had every intention of taking the pilot to the bottom with them.

But the Phantom did not return. Instead, for fifteen uneasy minutes, it served to remind them all that they were far from safe yet.

The next hurdle did not come from the air, but from the sea.

"Either that's a tornado coming up behind us," Fraser observed drily, "or a fast patrol boat."

Heads turned. "Was that a joke?" Hawksby asked.

Fraser smiled back. "Depends on your sense of humour. That pilot must have reported our position." Since leaving the shore they had been travelling at half-speed to conserve fuel. There was no guarantee how far they'd have to travel before a rendezvous with HMS *Antler* could be managed. Now they would have to go for all they were worth, regardless of their fuel reserves. Beneath them, the fibreglass hulls seemed to come alive, the wedge-shaped bows rising out of the water as the Evinrude monsters flexed their muscles, biting deep and hard.

Despite the unbridled surge of power, the menacing shape astern was increasing in size. The patrol boat was closing the gap.

"Didn't think the bloody Frogs knew how to build ships," Brummie Turner muttered in disgust. "That bastard's shifting fast enough!"

"Got a following wind, that's all," quipped Corporal Bill Mather, swinging the second Raider away from the first to spread the target offering.

It turned out to be a fortuitous move. A distant boom was heard above the bumping crash of the cavorting craft. A bright wink of light appeared on the patrol boat's fo'c'sle.

"INCOMING!" Mather bawled, reaching forward to pull Eva from her seat to the deck. They heard the whine of the

76 mm momentarily before the huge fountain of explosive and displaced water erupted between the two Raiders.

"Sod it," Turner said. He'd been drenched. "They tryin' to re-fight Trafalgar?" The sergeant was angry. There was nothing worse than being dragged back into a fight, just when you thought you'd left it. As Mather began a zig-zag course to throw the aim of the enemy gunner Turner rummaged in one of the storage compartments for a distress flare. He crawled to the stern, pulled the ring and let the clouds of red smoke gush out in their wake.

Hawksby looked on with an almost detached interest. It was out of his hands now. Sergeant Turner's move had been smart, but was largely foiled by the sea-breeze. Its direction was carrying the smoke screen across the stern of the neighbouring craft, but it left them fully exposed. And, whilst the evasive course kept the Iranian Navy gunner guessing, it also allowed the charging patrol boat to gain headway.

Two more booms followed in quick succession, the first sending a plume of spray up just forty feet in front. The second was only a few yards behind it. A huge wave of seawater slopped over the transom. They were filling rapidly, the bilges awash.

Hawksby was considering letting the patrol boat come alongside, close enough to set a small charge of plastic explosive on the hull, when the unexpected happened.

Suddenly a huge waterspout mushroomed mere feet away from the nearing patrol boat. The Iranian helmsman evidently spun the wheel on reflex, the sleek craft keeling hard over in a tight turn.

Instantly, Turner said: "Christ! Where did *that* come from? It was a big one, all right . . ." The deep-throated noise of a 4.5 inch shell rolled through the sea haze ahead like distant thunder. Another shell landed just short of amidships of the careering Iranian vessel.

A grin of satisfaction spread across Turner's face. "They've decided not to risk it."

Hawksby turned his gaze from the retreating patrol boat, the scorch marks on its paintwork clearly visible, and towards the distant grey shape. HMS *Antler* emerged like a

wraith from the haze some two miles off, the smoke still wafting from her 4.5 inch gun.

At the masthead, the White Ensign flapped excitedly.

On the bridge of *Antler*, Commander Joseph T. Richmond, RN, was miffed. Secretly, he'd hoped the Iranian fast patrol boat would put up a bit of a fight. And he'd dearly have loved to have given the order to 'Break out the battle ensigns' before the engagement. But in the event, there had been no time. Also, with the man from the Foreign Office standing beside him on the bridge, he would have been odds-on for a court-martial had he not obeyed the precise instructions to the letter.

As it was, Ferguson seemed well pleased. Throughout the ship's mad dash, his pale face had been as waxen as his neatly curled moustache. Now he allowed himself a faint smile. "Well done, Commander. A classic eleventh-hour touch."

"Thank you, sir." Richmond replied courteously, then turned to his Number One. "Make-ready to receive our guests."

"No," Ferguson interrupted, "not just yet. I'd like you to wait. Circle or something, whatever the expression is."

Richmond was amazed. "For God's sake why? There's a patrol boat around and our friends must be low on fuel."

Ferguson smiled. "Trust me. If Snapdragon makes for us, it can't be construed that we're rescuing them. We have to think of the international implications of openly associating with these people."

The commander went to speak again, then thought better of it. Instead he passed on the instructions to begin a port turn at slow ahead.

At the corner of the bridge, Lieutenant Colin Horne, the Senior Watchkeeper, lowered his binoculars. "That damn ship's turned up again, sir. The one that picked up our tail after we left Salalah."

Richmond crossed to his side. "I thought she'd given up chasing us around. Now what in the hell can she want?"

"Whatever it is," Horne said, "she's closer now than she's

come before. Her present course will cut between us and the Raiders."

Johnny Fraser was cheerful. "Looks like they've sent the whole damn fleet to meet us."

"Should think so," Benjamin said. "Only right they should show their appreciation." He followed the team leader's gaze towards the second ship that had cut in from the port side, now wallowing majestically in the troughs, hiding HMS *Antler* from view. He squinted against the dazzling shimmer. "What is she? A Type 21?"

"*Amazon* class?" Hawksby asked. Warships weren't his strong point.

Fraser nodded. "Probably. She's making a signal. Hold on, let me see . . ." All eyes turned to the brilliant signal lamp blinking out its message. "*Well done . . . Please send . . . cargo . . . across in one boat . . . We will take good care of them . . . Make your way . . . in second boat . . . to Antler . . . Again our thanks . . .*"

Hawksby and Fraser exchanged glances. The major shrugged. He could only assume that they wanted to give any pursuing Iranians a choice of targets to add to the confusion.

"I don't like it," Blake said flatly.

Hawksby wasn't in the mood to row. "Our's is not to reason why."

Eva's eyes clouded with concern. "Alan, you promise t'ere would be no danger to us. Now we do not 'af your protection."

"Don't start all that again. You're dealing with the Royal Navy. They'll look after you, don't worry. There could be a hundred and one reasons why they want to separate us. We might be needed for a new assignment. This ship may have a helicopter on board ready to spirit you away . . ."

That seemed to satisfy Blake. "Makes sense I suppose."

Eva still looked unhappy. Hawksby squeezed her arm. "As soon as I'm aboard, I'll check out the reasons for the split, all right? And I'll get an assurance as to where you are being taken."

She nodded and smiled resignedly. "Okay, Alan, I 'af trust in you."

He turned to Fraser. "Okay, Johnny, you'd better acknowledge. Meanwhile let's get all our gear into the one craft."

"I'm not sure I can handle this," Blake said, frowning at the outboard. It was an intimidating size.

"No sweat," Benjamin assured him, "just set it on low throttle and take your time to line up alongside the ship's ladder. When you're thirty feet away, cut the engine and coast in. Don't worry about the paintwork. Besides, they're experts at this sort of thing."

"All stowed," Sergeant Turner reported and clambered into the Raider alongside, taking the remaining items of SAS kit with him.

"Alan," Eva said suddenly.

Hawksby turned. "Yes?"

She scrambled across the deck to his side. "T'ank you for all you 'af done. Jon'i and I. Well, we are grateful. We might not 'af show it always, but truly we iss."

He tried to make light of it. "All part of the service."

She smiled, but her eyes were moist and betrayed her real feelings. "Some'ow I feel we do not see you again. T'at you disappear as fast as you come. Into a different world. We meet soon again, yes?"

Looking into those beautiful blue eyes, Hawksby felt no doubt in his mind. "Soon," he assured. He meant it.

Reluctantly she let go his arm. Benjamin was already aboard the second Raider, holding both craft together so that the gunwhales rubbed noisily. Hawksby stepped across.

Apprehensively, Blake opened up the throttle. Free from its heavy load, the boat sprang forward eagerly towards the waiting grey outline of the Type 21. He waved. Hawksby just caught Eva's call to 'Take Care!' before the words and sound of the outboard were whisked away by the light breeze.

It was suddenly very quiet in the cramped and heavily-laden craft. Everyone was aware of the lazy slap of the waves against the hull.

"So," McDermid said slowly, "it's all over." He sounded down.

Surprisingly only Dave Forbes sounded cheerful. He'd

come round during the gunfire and had remained conscious despite the effect of the morphine and brandy. He contentedly hugged Hameda to him. She looked around, embarrassed, but didn't offer any resistance. "Looks like I'm the only one who's got anything left to show for this little expedition."

"I guess someone's got te get the girl," McDermid muttered disparagingly.

"An' the carpet," Forbes reminded. "You've got to admit it'll look good in the Sergeants' Mess."

No one could disagree with that. And no one had the heart to point out that Forbes wasn't likely to be visiting the Mess much longer to enjoy his own trophy.

Johnny Fraser coaxed the Raider forward. Hawksby watched from the bows as the tiny speck he knew to be the other craft went alongside the distant grey bulk. He saw the vague shapes of sailors helping them aboard. It looked as though Blake had made a reasonable job of it.

He was surprised he wasn't feeling the casual quiet satisfaction of an assignment completed. That sensation of mild elation that made you recognise that all the hard training and planning had, after all, proven worthwhile. Time to reflect that you'd won through and were still alive. That inexorable weariness that swept over you when you knew it was all over, and the adrenalin stopped pumping. And that overwhelming desire for a square hot meal, a beer and a bath . . . oh, of course, and that blessed long sleep. Undisturbed.

He wondered if the others were feeling that way now. Probably. No doubt they were already looking forward to reminiscing in the secure sanctum of the Hereford Mess.

But he knew he wasn't sharing that this time. He realised he'd reached a crossroads in his life. There was a fork in the road and it was up to him which track he took.

He could take the easy way to maintain the *status quo*: return to the regiment and try to make a go of his marriage to Caroline. But he knew that if he couldn't prise her away from her family and her lifestyle, it would be doomed to failure.

Or he could plan to leave the Army. McDermid's words back at the cove had cut him deeply. He knew instinctively that what the Scotsman had said was true, and he sensed that

the others felt the same. But he wasn't sure he could change. He was thirty-nine – a bit old for new tricks.

Alternatively there was Oman. He knew he'd be welcomed as a commander in the Sultan's forces. Amonst the Arabs he knew he'd be content, with a real purpose and aim in life. Equally he knew that Caroline could never take it. Pink gins and hunt-balls were few and far between in Salalah.

The new dimension was Eva Olsen. A tough and resourceful lady, if unpredictable. She shared his sense of self-preservation. She'd had a genuine belief in the cause of the Iranian people, although that must have waned over the past few weeks. Perhaps she would find the struggle of the Omanis equally worthwhile? He knew he could have a damn good try persuading her.

He settled back, a half-smile on his face, recalling the warmth and animal passion of their illicit encounter beneath the remote Iranian bridge. He shut his eyes and felt the sun and the sea air against his face. Delicious. Peaceful.

"Something's wrong boss." There was deep concern in Johnny Fraser's voice.

Hawksby dragged himself away from the soft edge of sleep. "What's up, Johnny?"

The SAS captain pointed at the grey shape of the warship making headway off the starboard bow, now allowing them to see the elegant profile of HMS *Antler* beyond. "That bastard is not a sodding Type 21! It's only a bloody Koni! An effing Russian frigate. God, their lines are similar! The fore-gun fooled me. I just assumed . . ."

Hawksby was dumbfounded. All eyes turned in sheer disbelief as the haze-shrouded Soviet ship began dissolving from view. A group of sailors, like model railway figures in the distance, waved from the stern.

At last Hawksby began to grasp what had happened. "Quick, Johnny, make a signal to *Antler* and tell her to intercept . . ." Even as he spoke, he realised how stupid the words were. The Royal Navy intercept a Russian ship on the high seas? And to get back the prize of an illegal operation? It was hopeless. Slowly, he said: "Just inform *Antler* what has happened. The commander must make the decision."

Fraser picked up the Aldis. "Why the hell didn't *she* do something?"

A sudden thought occurred to Hawksby. "Has anyone seen my belt-pack? The one I gave to Blake back at the *qanat*?"

"'E's still got it, boss." It was Perkis. "Poked me in the eye with it earlier."

The Hawk stared after the spyship. It had melted into the haze as though it had never been there at all. And with it had vanished Jonathan Blake and Eva Olsen.

They had disappeared off the face of the earth, together with the only evidence of the reasons behind the mission. The filmed documentary details of Operation Fulcrum.

He shook his head slowly. "I don't believe it. I just don't bloody believe it."

EPILOGUE

CASPIAN COAST: 0700 hrs, Wednesday 24th September

The fisherman stood on the ancient stone jetty and stared out at the battered, paint-flaked fishing boat that struggled in from the Caspian Sea.

He looked a pathetic figure, alone in a vast grey seascape, where the brooding sky seemed to reach down and touch the sea. The collar of his old coat turned up against the blustery wind, he waited patiently. A travel-worn kit-bag was at his feet, filled with all his worldly possessions.

As the boat wallowed into the shore he watched with interest. It looked no different from the dozens of other craft used by the locals to catch sturgeon off the north Iranian coast. But he knew this was the one sent for him.

Absently he dug into his pocket. In the dullness of the late dawn, the bright flash of gold was unmistakable, as he cupped his hands around the flame of the Dupont lighter. His last Kent cigarette. He reflected that the only thing he would miss about Iran was his mistress. He himself had long since out-grown his own nationality. Years ago he had rejected the obsessive preachings of its religion and the blind obedience to the Islamic cause. He had become a true international and found that, in the big world outside, there were people willing to pay – and handsomely – for the benefit of his experience and many talents.

Colonel Najaf Murad's job was done, and he would go now to his new masters on the far shore of the Caspian. Masters whose own creed had no room for gods or political weakness, only an all-consuming lust for world domination, however long it might take. And those masters were not slow in handing out rewards to those who helped them further their aims.

Already he had sampled some of those rewards. Even in Teheran and Isfahan he had lived well, enjoying standards of living comfortably higher than those expected by SAVAMA, and previously SAVAK, personnel. Beyond the Iranian frontier, in a numbered Liechtenstein account, the accumulated wealth of payments had steadily mounted into a veritable personal fortune.

His masters, he was sure, were well pleased. After all, he had played his part in the downfall of Reza Shah. In his influential position within the country's security apparatus he had been ideally placed to help manipulate events. It had not been difficult to encourage excesses by the secret police and make sure their misdemeanours became known around the world. While at the same time he cultivated new friends amongst the holy men of Qum.

At each secret meeting with his Russian masters he began to realise, through protracted hours of exhaustive discussion, why they were willing to pay so highly for his continued co-operation. With the possibility of an Islamic Revolution they could eventually bring the pro-Western regimes of the Middle East tumbling to the ground from within. Implosion. From a nation's grass-roots upwards. So much more sinister, effective and long-lasting than overt interference, as they were learning in Afghanistan.

And in the chaos, confusion and instability that would inevitably follow, the seeds of Soviet influence and expansionism would germinate. Within a few years the flowers of Communism would rise naturally from the ruins, offering the only alternative to continued religious anarchy. As Lenin had put it, the Russians would be able to pick up the power lying in the streets.

He appreciated the importance his masters would put on his continued influence over the unpredictable mullahs.

For years he had known the extent of the Soviet destabilisation programme for Iran in readiness for 'the big push' to topple it into the hands of the Eastern bloc. Only recently, with his discovery of Fulcrum, had he learned how it was finally achieved. And that rankled.

His pride had been wounded because his masters had not put him fully in the picture. Not trusted him completely. Treated him like some Persian peasant, despite all he had done for them. However, he was well aware that Iran's Armed Forces and security organisations had been thoroughly penetrated to their upper echelons. He also knew that the Moscow-line Tudeh Party had a strong power-base at Teheran University ready to mobilise student unrest. But that was the easiest part, and hardly enough to transform overnight a long-established capitalist society into an enthusiastic socialist state.

It was only when his contact had unearthed the extent of the British intelligence involvement in Fulcrum that he accidentally stumbled across the first clue to how it was being done. But his first reaction had been to tell his masters of his discovery. He felt sure they would be willing to pay handsomely for such precious information.

Immediately after the meeting with Khomeini, when the Imam had demanded Blake's execution whilst Beheshti had pressed for more information, he had made contact with a vice-consul at the Soviet Embassy: a man from KGB Department VIII. Murad had been stunned by his reaction. Whilst the Russian was grateful for the news of Blake's arrest, he was furious that Murad's investigations had already revealed so much. The man demanded that the journalist and his girlfriend be eliminated immediately, before they said any more. Murad explained that Khomeini had ordered that they be executed next morning. That seemed to satisfy him. However it did not satisfy Murad. He was curious. What more *was* there for Blake to tell?

Then that night had come the dramatic rescue at Isfahan, like a bolt from the blue. That had rocked the boat. His masters were not amused.

But, whilst the chase ensued, he had directed his team of investigators going over Sabs Karemi's research to dig deep into the dirt for a Soviet connection with Fulcrum. With such a vital new clue, it had not taken them long.

Their first discovery had shocked him the most. Ayatollah Khomeini had been amongst the top five Soviet agents in

Iran for years, reporting through a highly-placed Iraqi official to Warsaw, thence Moscow.

He had sold them on the concept of using Islamic fundamentalism as a revolutionary force, using the clergy's influence on the common Persian man as a stepping stone to Communism.

The idea hadn't been the Imam's originally. It was first put to him as part of the Fulcrum plan by the British, and he had suggested to Department VIII that it might fit in well with Moscow's plans. Back in the days before the American-inspired coup of 1953, that had been how the British occupation forces had sustained control and continuing influence for decades. Through the powerful religious system that touched every home in Iran. It had worked then, the British reasoned, so why not now?

It was just the start of Fulcrum. Just the start of a brilliant British programme that had inadvertently given Moscow the way to achieve its own ends.

No wonder Khomeini had insisted on Blake's execution when he knew of Fulcrum's discovery.

Now Murad knew it all. An indictment of his professionalism.

He understood how Khomeini's influence had grown so inexorably, beyond the wildest predictions of the world's political pundits. Behind it all, he now knew, lay a British plan that had been mercilessly infiltrated and manipulated by his masters across the Caspian. The rest was history.

That was what the man Blake could not have understood. He never had a chance. Men who have the power to shape history to their own ends are not easily deterred. Not only was the journalist wanted by Khomeini and the British, but also by Moscow.

In the end, although he had not resolved the matter of Blake's escape to the Revolutionary Council's satisfaction, his masters were well pleased. And that was what mattered. It was a measure of his far-sightedness that he warned them that, if his own men failed, he was confident that an attempt would be made to pick-up the journalist off the south coast of Iran. They were immediately able to confirm the presence of

a Royal Navy ship. And, naturally, one of their own nearby. No, they were well pleased. Now the shaping of this particular piece of history could continue uninterrupted . . .

The fishing-boat was changing course to come alongside the jetty. He could clearly see the two crew: one man in the wheel-house and the other on the fo'c'sle, preparing to take a line ashore.

In the open aft well-deck stood a lone third figure. Against the upturned collar of the black gaberdine raincoat, the man's face was deathly pale and gaunt. His short blond hair bristled in the breeze.

Idly, the fisherman on the jetty speculated where he might be going to next. Iraq, perhaps, now that the war had started? If Iraq won, the mullahs would fall and the Communists would be ready to step into the power vacuum. If Iraq lost, the Ayatollah's religious crusade could set the entire Gulf aflame. His masters couldn't lose.

The boat was alongside. He ground out his cigarette on the rough-hewn stone beneath his feet.

He was glad that they had arrived. Peace of mind wouldn't come to him completely until he'd left these troubled shores. Deliberately he had ignored the signal summoning him to the Revolutionary Council. Instead, he'd departed from Isfahan immediately, leaving instructions for his aide to attend in his place. The poor man's fate was sealed. He would feel the full avenging fury of the displeased mullahs, of that there was no doubt.

But then, thought the fisherman as he picked up the old kit-bag and moved slowly towards the waiting seaman, there always had to be losers.

The fisherman stood on the well-deck and watched as the Iranian coast disappeared over the horizon. There was a stink of diesel and fish in the boat, and it was choppy away from the shelter of the land. He felt a little uncomfortable.

Turning to the man in the black raincoat beside him, he smiled and asked: "Excuse me, comrade. I wonder if I could trouble you for a cigarette?"

"I do not smoke," replied the gaunt man. He did not smile.

Then a seagull swooped low over the stern, screeching loudly as it passed. And when it had gone Colonel Najaf Murad lay dead, his blood running into the bilgewater that slopped between the deckboards.

The seaman replaced the smoking machine-pistol in the stowage compartment and lifted out two lead fishing-weights.

He looked down at the body thoughtfully, then wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Who was he, anyway?"

Still looking out to sea, the gaunt man said: "Just a man who knew too much. A nobody who thought he was somebody."

OMAN: 1800 hrs, Wednesday 1st October

Major Alan Hawksby was in a buoyant mood as he stepped out of the fierce Omani sun and into the welcome cool of the Ops room.

"Well done," Fraser said from his seat by the desk. "I gather it was a hundred per cent successful."

Thankfully Hawksby slung his Bergen pack into the corner and dropped into the wicker armchair beneath the ceiling fan. "A classic, Johnny, if I say so myself. We killed six before they decided they'd had enough. Twenty wounded and the rest of the adoo scarpered like the very devil was after them."

"He was." Fraser grinned. "Any spoils?"

"Enough to re-arm the whole of the Gulf, I'd say. Rifles, grenades, mortars, the lot. We gained total surprise when we hit them. I don't think we'll see them on the jebel for a while to come. When will they realise that their methods are out of date?" He felt exhilarated. "Fancy a beer, Johnny? Got to celebrate. Reckon my stars are in the ascendancy after all!"

Fraser didn't smile. "I've had another signal from Hereford. Last night. Definitely no more excuses. Adoo or no adoo, you're on the next flight back."

Hawksby scowled. "So that bugger Ferguson still wants blood, does he?"

"He still reckons we should have done something to stop

Blake going aboard that Soviet ship. Says we should have realised that she'd blocked *Antler*'s view so they couldn't see what was going on."

"And he's beaten a path to the Old Man's door to nail the blame on us, I suppose. Searching hard for a scapegoat for him losing his charge."

Fraser shrugged. "Well, the CO does seem pretty keen to see you. In person. And soon."

Hawksby lay back in the chair and shut his eyes. Blindly, he pulled his clay pipe and tobacco pouch from his goatskin waistcoat. Absently, he said: "You realise what this is going to mean, Johnny?"

"Maybe."

"If the FO is after blood, I'll be *lucky* to get RTU'd. More likely it'll be a dishonourable discharge." He opened his eyes and looked down at the pipe he'd begun to fill. "But I tell you, Johnny, if we're working for buggers like Ferguson, I'd sooner jack it in anyway."

Suddenly Fraser said: "Before you get too despondent at the thought of kicking the sand out of your boots, I'd like you to have a look at these."

"What's that?" Hawksby replied, sucking on his pipe as he attempted to light the tobacco.

Fraser handed across a fan of photographs.

"In Farsi," Hawksby said, puzzled. "Documents in Farsi." He shuffled through the prints. "Where'd you get these from?"

"Just after you left for the jebel, Alan. Brummie Turner was cleaning out the Raider when he came across a Minox film cassette. Under some ropes.

Hawksby sat up. "You know what this is?"

The captain was grinning. "Must have dropped out of your belt-order. Probably when Blake was scrambling aboard."

"I don't care how we got it, Johnny!" His voice was almost hysterical. "It might just save my bloody bacon. A pretty good second prize, I'd say!"

"Might be more than that," Fraser said quietly.

"How d'you mean?"

"Those prints are just those I thought looked the most promising," Fraser replied, watching the major's reaction carefully. "There's a stack still be done." He prodded the top print in Hawksby's hand. "I've put a yellow chinagraph around the interesting passages."

Hawksby's pipe had failed to light, but he was unaware of it, as his eyes scanned the elegant Farsi script.

The noisy squeak of the overhead fan seemed to fill the heavy silence. Fraser glanced up. Like his predecessors he had never got around to oiling it.

A long, low whistle escaped Hawksby's lips, but he didn't look up.

"Enlightening, eh?" Fraser prompted. "You know about the British Fulcrum business?"

"What?" Hawksby tapped the prints with his pipe stem. "Oh, well a little. Eva gave me an inkling. I guessed there was more to it. But *this* is unbelievable." He looked up. "Or rather the opposite. It all fits into place. I mean this report is fundamentally an Iranian intelligence summary by this guy Sabs Karemi, with a lot of documentary evidence. There must be some guesswork, but he seemed certain about the Ian Ferguson connection."

Fraser nodded. "I've done a little discreet homework while you've been away, and it all fits. Ian Ferguson is a long-serving Colonial Office man. Usual story, resented the merger with the FO in the late '60s. He moved over to intelligence work but got increasingly peeved as he was overlooked for promotion. He was just about the only voice in SIS to warn about the threat of a grass-roots Islamic overthrow in Iran. Been predicting it for years.

"So, when they wanted someone to head up the Fulcrum operation, he seemed like the natural choice. Only I reckon he was only too keen to make it work."

Hawksby nodded sagely, trying to form a mental picture of the dapper Ferguson with his waxed moustache. "A chance to prove the oracle was right."

"Too bloody true, Alan," Fraser confirmed. "According to that report, the Foreign Office idea was that Fulcrum should just shake up the Shah a bit by putting some weight

behind old Khomeini's movement. You know, get a few reforms through, loosen up on the old human rights bit. Similar sort of thing to what Carter was up to. There was real concern that the Russians would gain ground if the Shah didn't take steps to appease his critics.

"But old Ferguson had other ideas. And he had a few influential friends in the City and in Europe who thought the same. When the word leaked out that the Shah was ill, and with no mature successor, they saw it as a heaven-sent opportunity to kick the Yanks out for good."

Hawksby found it hard to believe that there could be such a build-up of resentment to American influence in Iran. "Did Ferguson really think he could turn the clock back? Britain wasn't doing so badly out of the Shah, trade-wise."

Fraser shrugged. "Not according to some. Before the Americans pushed their way in, back in '53, Britain was very strong there. And since the oil boom the Americans have pushed everyone else out. They've dominated totally and flogged billions of dollars of arms to the place. Like a salesman with a housewife who can't say no. A lot of countries were getting pretty pissed off."

"So Ferguson didn't find it hard to get support in Europe?" Hawksby suggested.

"Damn influential support, Alan," Fraser replied, warming to his subject. He'd been studying the report thoroughly. "Nothing official, but some powerful political and industrial lobbies. He persuaded the French to allow Khomeini to set up camp there. That was the real achievement. I mean, who's going to listen to some religious twit prattling away in some backwater like Iraq? In Paris old Crazy K had the attention of the world's media . . . with a little help from Ferguson.

"Then, in Germany, interested parties started inciting the Iranian students over there in support of Khomeini and the overthrow of the Shah. That's where it all started really."

Hawksby shook his head. "I don't really understand why. I mean were the pickings really worth it?"

Fraser gave a short snort of laughter. "Ferguson thought

so. He evidently believed Britain would benefit along with his cronies in the City. For a start they could see the oil contracts coming up for renewal in 1979 and reckoned it would be a better deal with their man on the inside. Khomeini. And arms. Buy cheap oil in return for expensive arms. Both Britain and Germany had big expectations in that direction. I'm sure Ferguson found plenty of takers in high places."

Hawksby realised that he still hadn't lit his pipe. He struck a match and began blowing slow rings of smoke as he considered the other implications of the revelation. He was well aware that the breaking of Iran's military strength would have pleased many of Britain's friends in the Gulf. Several Arab governments, he knew, were becoming increasingly nervous of an all-powerful Iran–Egypt axis, with a ruthless Israel friendly to both. Ian Ferguson would have been well aware of that too.

Fraser continued: "If Sabs Karemi's to be believed, Ferguson wasn't aware that Khomeini was on the Soviet's payroll. Had he been, he might have been more concerned when the Soviets started to take an interest in Fulcrum. As it was, I think he welcomed their interest. They've been wanting to get rid of the Shah for years, and Ferguson thought he could make use of their vast funding reserves to finance the venture out of all proportion to the initial Foreign Office plan. And they could mobilise an anti-Shah student protest. It also avoided any embarrassing use of Western currency, and it would be virtually impossible to trace where it had come from."

"So that's why the Mulcruf Foundation was set up," Hawksby observed dryly. "As a collection point and to launder all the funds from whatever source. No wonder no one in SIS or the Foreign Office realised that Fulcrum had grown so large."

"Until it came too late," Fraser pointed out. "Then friend Ferguson got a bit of a shock, too. Finding his stooge Khomeini storming to power – surrounded by PLO henchmen supplied by Moscow! The Soviets had the whole thing set up, just waiting for such an event. They'd established

power-bases in the student movement, the Armed Forces and in the clergy through Khomeini."

Hawksby stared down at the photographs in his hands. "What tangled webs we weave," he muttered, still finding it hard to digest the enormity of the revelations from Sabs Karemi.

Fraser said: "Of course, when Crazy K did establish himself, he immediately tried to shake off the Kremlin and paddle his own canoe. Those old mullahs aren't as daft as they look . . ."

"It doesn't matter, Johnny," Hawksby said. "In the bloody chaos we found over there, the Commies will have a field-day eventually, and they know it. I bet they were even expecting Khomeini to do the dirty on them once he was in power. They're a patient bloody lot. They won't mind waiting to ride in on the back of a religious uprising."

Fraser looked thoughtful. "I wonder what the Foreign Office think of Ferguson now? I mean, as far as they know, he just ran the operation according to orders. Hardly his fault it was taken over by those wicked Russians. Still, can't have done his reputation much good."

Hawksby allowed himself a smile. "I don't know. After all, you said he'd been predicting the revolution for years. Proved his point now. And, don't forget, a lot of people are going to be pleased the Americans are out of Iran. Fulcrum might not have been planned to go as far as it did, but now it has, the Foreign Office is going to make the best of it. I bet we do our damnedest to fill the vacumm left by the States. Politically and industrially. Falling over ourselves to appease Khomeini. In a way Britain's almost obliged to finish off Ferguson's private plan, just to stop the Russians from establishing themselves."

"Bet old Ferguson would have retired in bloody splendour with an OBE or some such," Fraser muttered in disgust. "With thanks from Her Majesty for being such a far-sighted smart-arse. Not to mention pay-offs from his industrial friends . . . Of course our chum Blake rather upset the applecart."

Hawksby nodded slowly. "A slight understatement, I'd

say. Ferguson knows he'll get no prizes if the Foreign Office finds out he deliberately caused the damn revolution. Christ, not only did Blake have us after him, but Khomeini's mob and the bloody Soviets."

"And look who won the jackpot again," Fraser observed sourly.

Slowly Hawksby rose out of the wicker chair. "Well, it explains one thing I never could quite fathom."

"What was that?"

"Why we were ever sent in the first place. Khomeini knew he'd been set-up, but then he wouldn't care if Blake had the story. The mullahs already had him under lock-and-key. So why should we go in to rescue him so he'd be free to make real trouble for Britain if he shot his mouth off?"

"Pressure from certain parties in the FO?" Fraser suggested. "Ian Ferguson again?"

Hawksby lit his pipe again. "Who didn't want anyone to know that he'd allowed the Soviets to take over the Fulcrum apparatus. Sweet Jesus, no wonder Blake thought we'd been sent to kill him."

"Did he really?" Fraser was amused.

Hawksby didn't see the funny side of it. "Well, Johnny, he was bloody well right, wasn't he?"

"How d'you mean?" He blinked rapidly. "What, the Soviet ship?"

Sometimes, Hawksby thought, even SAS officers can be incredibly slow. "We as good as handed Blake and Eva over to the Russians on a plate. We were manipulated, Johnny, bloody manipulated. I don't know if Ferguson told the Russians when and where we were coming out, but *someone* must have done! If he didn't plan it, he jumped at a heaven-sent opportunity. There's Ferguson demanding my head, when it was him aboard *Antler* who made bloody sure the Russians got them first. If they hadn't turned up, he'd probably have arranged to have them assassinated *anyway*."

Fraser's brows knitted. "In fact, if it was Ferguson who was pressing all along for our mission to be sent, then we might as well have been working for the bloody Kremlin for the past few weeks . . ."

Hawksby stared up at the fan. It looked as though he was thinking. In fact he was trying to stop tears of emotion breaking out. His mind's eye was filled with the vision of Eva's face. The fascinating lilt of her Norwegian accent was ringing in his ears. At last he managed to speak, his voice cracked. "At least in Oman you know who the bloody hell you're fighting."

A shadow suddenly filled the doorway, a man's shape silhouetted in the frame of harsh sunlight.

"Ah, Major Hawksby, there you are!" Ian Ferguson sounded pleased to see him.

Hawksby froze, turning slowly, wondering what the hell the SIS man had heard. Somehow he managed to control the tone of his voice: "I thought you were back in Blighty."

Ferguson, neatly dressed in a pale blue tropical suit and knitted tie, wandered across to the wicker chair. "I was until yesterday, Major. Then I heard a rumour that your chaps had got hold of some Foreign Office property." He gave Hawksby a withering glance. "I'm surprised such rumours are allowed to emanate from the revered headquarters of our illustrious Special Air Service Regiment. You, of all people, ought to know that careless talk costs lives . . . Anyway, I took the first flight out."

He glanced down at the sheaf of prints splayed out on the seat of the chair where Hawksby had left them. "Ah, I see the rumours were correct. Very naughty of you."

Fraser said quickly: "The film didn't turn up until after you'd left for the UK. We didn't realise its importance."

Ferguson picked up the prints and smiled. "Oh, its of no importance outside my office, Captain. None at all. It's just the principle. Government property and all that. You have the film safe, I trust?"

Reaching in the desk drawer, Fraser picked up the Minox cassette and tossed it across, hard. It was a test of wills. Ferguson caught it with a snatch.

"Right, gentlemen, thank you. You can forget all about it now." He started towards the door, then paused. Turning to face Hawksby, he said: "By the way, Major, I'm glad you're back from your trip to the jebel. Your Commanding Officer

and I would like a very thorough word with you back in the UK. As soon as you can, right?"

Beneath the waxed moustache, the lips creased into a sarcastic smile, but his eyes glittered without humour. Hawksby's eyes hooded, the muscles in his narrow cheeks hardening in suppressed anger.

"Why wait, my dear chap?"

Ferguson and Hawksby turned, stunned at the sound of the familiar clipped voice coming from the bead curtains behind the desk. The stout, florid-faced man in the immaculate drill uniform was no mirage. There was no mistaking the granite-eyed face of the colonel of 22 SAS.

"Sorry if I made you jump, chaps," the CO said lightly. "Truth is I've been doing a little earwigging with the kind permission of Captain Fraser here. Very interesting it's been too. Worth the long trip. Same flight as you actually, but I move faster . . ."

Ferguson's mouth dropped.

Hawksby glanced at Fraser, who shrugged apologetically. "I thought I ought to use my initiative." He grinned. "And the CO needed to be sure you really hadn't been negligent."

Ferguson's eyes darted towards the door. The Old Man read the signal. "Don't even think about thinking about it, old son. From now on you're in Major Hawksby's custody until a Special Branch escort can get out here."

The Hawk said, through clenched teeth, "Permission to blow the prisoner's brains out, sir?" He wasn't joking.

"Whilst trying to escape, eh?" The Old Man hesitated, his eyes glinting mischievously. "No, I don't think so. Permission refused, Major."

Ian Ferguson breathed again.

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